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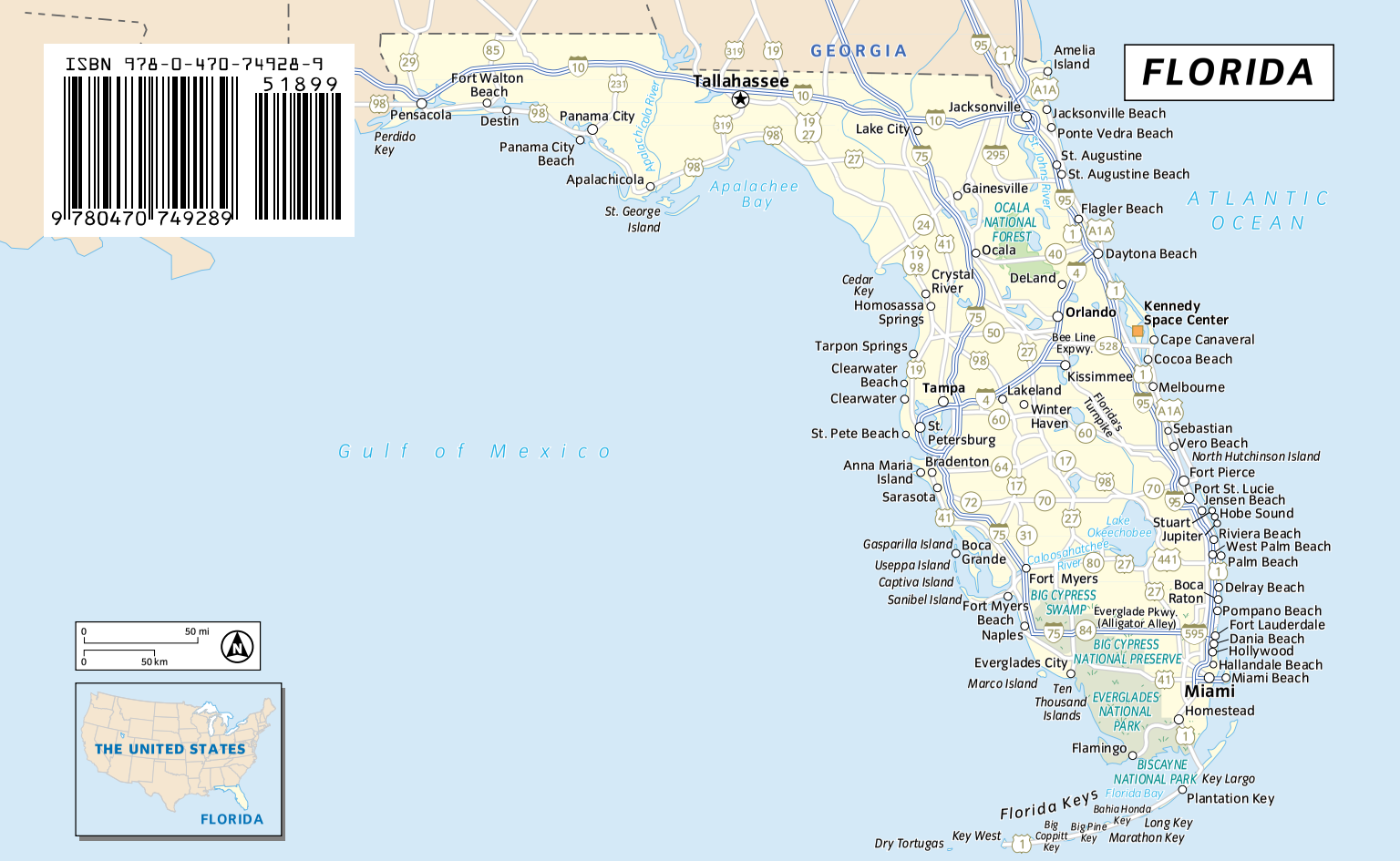

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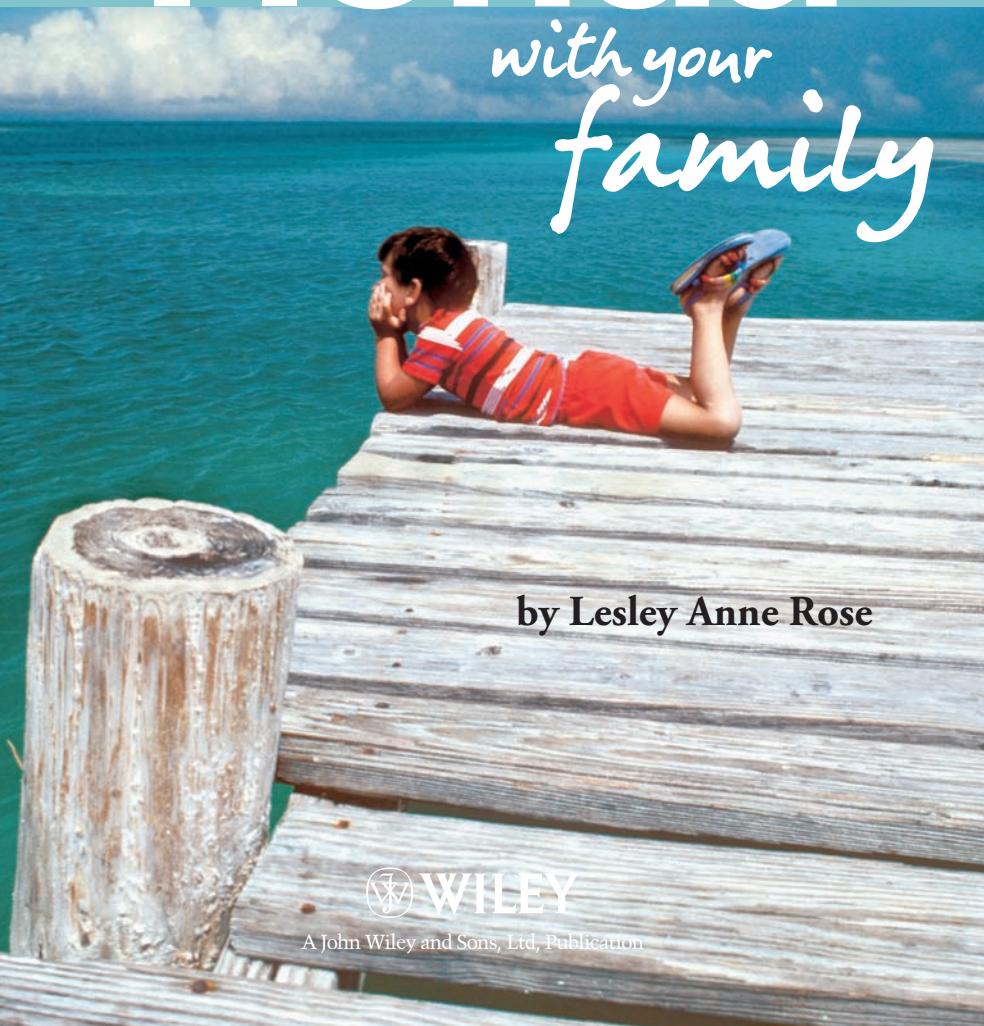

by Lesley Anne Rose

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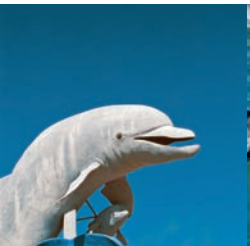

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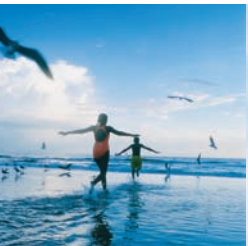
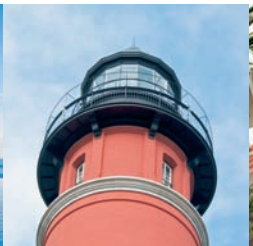

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About the Author

Lesley Anne Rose is a freelance writer with a focus on travel and script writing. She has written guidebooks, articles and a travel column and her specialist areas include North America, Malta, the Southern Caribbean and the UK, especially the Lake District and Scotland. As a script writer, Lesley Anne has seen her work produced in regional theatre. She also teaches travel writing.

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Dedication

To Martin Chester – 'the navigator'.

An Additional Note

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors and publisher cannot be held responsible for experiences of readers while travelling. Your safety is important to us however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings.

Star Ratings, Icons & Abbreviations

Hotels, restaurants and attraction listings in this guide have been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities and special features using a star-rating system. Hotels, restaurants, attractions, shopping and nightlife are rated on a scale of zero stars (recommended) to three (exceptional). In addition to the star rating system, we also use 5 feature icons that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice and unique experiences, and amenities available. Throughout the book, look for:

FIND	Special finds – those places only insiders know about
MOMENT	Special moments – those experiences that memories are made of
VALUE	Great values – where to get the best deals
OVERRATED	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
GREEN	Attractions employing responsible tourism policies

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE	American Express
DC	Diners Club
DISC	Discover
MC	MasterCard
V	Visa

And the amenities:

Airconditioning
Baby Changing
Babysitting
Bar
Breastfeeding
Buggy rental
Café
Car Park
Car Park – Free
Car Park - Paid
Children's Club
Children's Menu
Cinema
Cots Available
Cycle Hire
DVD
Fitness Centre
Fridge
Full Kitchen
Games
Golf
High Chairs
Internet Access
iPod Docking
Jacuzzi/Hot Tub/Whirlpool

Laundry Facilities
Lockers
Microwave
Minibar
Picnic Area
Play Area
Pool - Children's
Pool - Indoor
Pool - Outdoor
Restaurant
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Shuttle Bus
Snack Bar
Spa Facilities
Sports
Tennis Courts
TV
Washer/Dryer
Watersports Rental Equipment
Wheelchair Access
Wheelchair Rental

A Note on Prices

In the Family-Friendly Accommodation section of this book we have used a price category system.

How to Contact Us

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places – hotels, restaurants, shops and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travellers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that too. Please email: frommers@wiley.co.uk or write to:

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1 Family Highlights of Florida

When I first travelled to Florida over 20 years ago, I, like many first-time visitors, had my heart set on nothing else but doing Disney. While each subsequent visit to the Sunshine State has involved whatever new theme park or new rides there are to enjoy, each has also taken me farther away from Florida's tourist-dominated central region and deep into its farthest-flung nooks and crannies. Here I discovered just how much this diverse state has to offer all ages and just how many inexpensive activities can be enjoyed off the beaten track.

That said, for the millions of families who travel to Florida each year, its larger-than-life theme parks are the biggest draw, and a wide choice of direct flights make it easy to travel to Orlando from inside the US and internationally. With accommodation options from luxury self-catering villas to budget motels, all set up for visiting families, and of a high standard, it's equally easy once you get there.

However, a growing range of tours, fly-drive and multi-destination deals are opening up possibilities farther afield. I now regularly hear a whole host of international accents on the beaches of the Deep South-influenced Panhandle, where a slower way of life prevails, or on the vibrant streets of Key West, where a Caribbean-infused culture and lifestyle hold sway. And it's only when you consider just how different these two places are that the myriad of possibilities and experiences this vast state offers becomes clear.

After its glittering theme parks, Florida's award-winning, sun-drenched beaches are its biggest draw. And, apart from the curve of the Big Bend, each coastal region has more than its fair share of both tourist-filled beaches, such as Tampa Bay's Clearwater, and practically deserted sands epitomised by the likes of Fernandina Beach in the northeast. Away from the sands, Florida's glorious outdoors offers first-class snorkelling, endless kayaking and canoeing, and miles of great cycling. Plus many chances to learn all about the state's intricate ecosystems, abundant wildlife and endangered species.

Families should never underestimate the appeal of Florida's cities, each shaped by an influx of different cultures. Big-name destinations such as the stylish Miami, thoroughly modern Jacksonville and Cuban-influenced Tampa contain a range of excellent interactive museums, family-friendly attractions and opportunities to watch uniquely American sporting events. While others, including St. Augustine, North America's oldest-surviving European settlement, and state capital Tallahassee, are places to live and breathe Florida's diverse history.

Once you start breaking down geographical constraints by taking internal flights or incorporating road trips into a visit, you can cover a lot of ground in a single trip. And if you start taking seriously all that smaller cities such as Gainesville have to offer, a Florida holiday need

not break the bank. Yet, as the many families from outside of Florida buying property here suggests, this is a place with enduring appeal, at the heart of which is the endless excitement generated by the ever-changing tourist areas, contrasted with the timeless allure of areas like the eternal Everglades and laid-back Keys.

TOP 10 UNMISSABLE FLORIDA FAMILY HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Getting** up close to the amazing animals at Disney's majestic Animal Kingdom; p. 63.
2. **Gazing** up at Saturn V at the Kennedy Space Center; p. 80.
3. **Searching** for seashells on the shores of Sanibel Island; p. 130.
4. **Experiencing** the thrill of the racetrack at the Daytona 500 Experience; p. 163.
5. **Discovering** Miami's amazing Art Deco district; p. 188.
6. **Picnicking** on Honeymoon Island; p. 124.
7. **Exploring** St. Augustine's historic streets; p. 155.
8. **Snorkelling** at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park; p. 229.
9. **Swimming** in sparkling spring waters at Wakulla Springs; p. 261.
10. **Learning** about the care of injured sea turtles at the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center; p. 199.

BEST FAMILY EXPERIENCES

Best Theme Park For families with young children, nothing beats getting up close to the amazing wildlife at Disney's **Animal Kingdom.** See p. 63. While families with teens who like nothing better than hurling themselves through the air on an array of white-knuckle rides, should aim for **Universal's Islands of Adventure,** where they won't know which thrill to head for first. See p. 68. The

Universal's Islands of Adventure, © 2007 Universal Orlando Resort. All rights reserved.

much anticipated Wizarding World of Harry Potter has now opened its doors to the world and this all-new theme park within Islands of Adventure is poised to deliver magical-filled fun for all ages. See p. 66.

INSIDER TIP

For a taste of Florida's theme parks of old, before Disney rolled into town, see ***www.lostparks.com***.

Best Family Event Each night **Disney's Hollywood Studios** draws the day to an end with its dazzling **Fantasmic!** show, for which the 10,000 seats and standing room places fill up most nights. This water and fireworks spectacular, loosely based around the classic animation *Fantasia* and featuring characters from *The Lion King, Jungle Book, Beauty and the Beast* and many other Disney favourites, is a classic tale of good versus evil, played out in an epic style that will entertain all the family. See p. 62.

Best City Cities aren't always the first destination of choice when planning a family holiday to Florida, but those looking for some city life to spice up their time in the Sunshine State won't be disappointed with **Miami.** You'll find all the ingredients for a great family holiday including fine beaches, world-class attractions, shopping to suit all ages and tastes, plus the world-famous Art Deco district. See p. 188.

South Beach, Miami

Best Natural Attraction **The Everglades** is a vast, subtropical wilderness that sprawls across Florida's southern tip and is best visited via the tours and trails owned and operated by **The**

Boat tour of the Florida Everglades

Florida's Best Family-Friendly Beaches

Florida's fantastic coastline is holiday heaven for the beach-loving family, and regional highlights for those travelling with children are:

- Along the Panhandle – **Seaside,** with its vibrant child-friendly community and powdery sands. See p. 255.
- In the southwest – **Fort Myers Beach,** a vast swathe of wide, white sands with the lively Times Square at the north end and opportunities for solitude farther south. See p. 117.
- In the Florida Keys – **Bahia Honda State Park** offers visitors the combination of fine sands, great swimming and snorkelling, and compelling views of an old wooden road bridge, worn away by hurricanes and time. See p. 230.
- In the northeast – **Fernandina Beach** is a charming mix of windswept shores and an historic downtown. See p. 161.
- In the southeast – **Fort Lauderdale Beach** is well used by local families, and visitors can choose between the bustling Beach Place, great if you're travelling with older children, or chilling out in quieter areas with youngsters. See p. 194.
- In central Florida – **Cocoa Beach** is a must for surf-loving teens (see p. 158) and the artificial beach at **Disney's Typhoon Lagoon** is a convincing alternative for those who can't get to the coast. See p. 100.

Everglades National Park. There's simply nowhere else like this in the world and once you start delving into the land- and waterscapes that make up this unique, but shy, region, the glades will reward you with a glimpse of just how fabulous it really is. An added bonus for children is the **Junior Ranger** programme, an activity booklet full of ways to educate and entertain young visitors, with the chance of being enrolled as a Junior Ranger at the end. See p. 226. While in the central region, the sweeping landscape of Gainesville's Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park is a fine second best and offers the chance to see wild horses roam. See p. 151.

Best Aquarium **The Florida Aquarium** is both one of the world's top aquariums and one of the state's best family attractions. The aquarium contains thousands of different types of marine plants and animals and a visit includes plenty of children's games for all ages and the opportunity to take an eco tour out onto the waters of Tampa Bay. See p. 134.

Best Outdoors Activity Unbeknown to many UK visitors, Florida is one of the best places in the US to kayak, and even young children who've never

Daytona International Speedway

lifted a paddle in their lives will find plenty of opportunities to take to the water and give it a go. **Adventures Unlimited,** located in **Blackwater River State Park,** organise excellent kayaking, canoeing and tubing along the slow, wide river that runs through the heart of the forest (see p. 262). And **Captiva Kayaks & Wildside Adventures** on **Captiva Island** will take all ages out into the wonderful world of Florida's coastal waterways. See p. 136.

Best Snorkelling Florida's underwater realms are just as stunning as its endless beaches, and the best way for families to peer into this wonderful marine world is via an organised snorkelling tour at **John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** at Key Largo in the Florida Keys. The Keys' reefs are the only living coral reef barrier in North America and home to masses of colourful tropical fish and weird and wonderful marine plants. Look out for the famous underwater 'Christ of the Deep' statue and bring an underwater camera. See p. 229.

Best Tour Climb aboard a specially created swamp buggy and take a tour on the wild side with **Babcock Wilderness Adventures Eco Tours.** These fabulous child-friendly tours take visitors through Telegraph Cypress Swamp and an authentic south Florida ranch, which still farms in a traditional, eco-friendly style. Expect to encounter cracker cattle, big cats, alligators, wild pigs (and piglets if you're lucky) and maybe the odd cowboy. See p. 135.

Best Nature Centre Located inside Boca Raton's Red Reef Park, **Gumbo Limbo Nature Center** is a fantastic facility where children can get up close to sick and injured animals being nursed back to health and engage with Florida's plants, animals and natural environments via displays, activities and trails. See p. 199.

Best Family Adventure At **Fantasy of Flight** a family of four can

board a vintage biplane and take to the skies above central Florida for a trip of a lifetime. And if the Biggles bug bites your child along the way, there are plenty of wonderful old planes inside the attraction itself, plus opportunities to learn just how and why they fly. See p. 96.

Best Sporting Attraction **Daytona 500 Experience** is the home of NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Racing), which was founded on the famous sands of Daytona Beach. With roots that reach into the Deep South, stock car racing is one of the most popular sports in the US, and this electrifying racetrack brings you right up close to its history, drivers and high-speed thrills. See p. 163.

Best Journey Break The rest stops at either end of the **Sunshine Skyway Bridge** are brilliant places to get out of the car and stretch your legs. Each stop provides glorious views of this graceful architectural masterpiece and the magnificent Tampa Bay it arches over. See p. 118.

Best Road Trip Stretching the length of Florida's east coast from Fernandina Beach in the north to Miami's South Beach, **SR-A1A** takes in the likes of the Kennedy Space Center, Daytona Beach, the secluded coastal mansions of the rich and famous, some cool surfing spots and Miami's Art Deco, making for a gentle yet diverse road trip with something to interest all groups along the way.

Best Place to Explore History **St. Augustine** offers an unusual experience of history in North America, embodying the Spanish intervention in this region in the 16th century, and is basically one big, living museum. This old city is fascinating to walk around and contains a number of attractions where children can learn about this very special slice of Florida history. See p. 155.

Best All-American Experience Infused with the same magic ingredient that makes cricket so quintessentially English, **baseball** is uniquely American in ways that not even America can put its finger on. Matches are very popular

The Daytona Cubs

Best Florida Walks

Although a trip to Florida will almost inevitably involve a fair amount of driving, there are plenty of opportunities for families who like to walk. Most of Florida's state parks are filled with walking trails which cater for all ages and abilities, while the downtown areas of most cities are best traversed by foot. These are my five favourite Florida walks:

Indigo Trail: This wooden boardwalk trail through part of Sanibel's J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge leads visitors through 2 miles of tropical hammock and lush mangrove forest. See p. 136.

Solar Walk: Encounter all the planets in the solar system on this mile-long stretch of Gainesville's 8th Avenue. See p. 152.

Duval Street: The backbone of Key West, this long straight street is the place to experience the full-on vibrancy of the farthest-flung corner of the US. See p. 220.

Ocean Drive, South Beach: The place to dress up and see and be seen, while discovering Miami's sleek Art Deco. See p. 186.

Main Street, USA, Magic Kingdom: Leading straight to Cinderella's fairytale castle, this iconic theme park's thoroughfare is the quintessential Disney experience. See p. 55.

with local families and you can catch a minor league game at venues such as Daytona Beach's Jackie Robinson Ballpark (see p. 160), one of the major league training matches that take place throughout the state in spring (see p. 21) or a regular major league match in Tampa or Miami. See box on p. 42.

BEST ACCOMMODATION

Best Theme Park Accommodation Themed in the style of an African Game Reserve, Disney's sumptuous **Animal Kingdom Lodge** is such a great resort for children that you might struggle to tear them away from its swimming pools, playgrounds and special activities, and actually get them into the theme parks. See p. 85. However, for older children and teens, **Universal's Hard Rock Hotel** is too cool to be true. See p. 87.

Best Family-Focused Beach Resort **Cheeca Lodge & Spa** in the Florida Keys offers laid-back luxury in a paradise setting and organises one of the best children's programmes of any resort in Florida. Its many facilities cater for both young guests and adults who want time alone to relax. See p. 241.

Best Family-Friendly Bed & Breakfast Right in the heart of Key West's historic old town, **Island City House Hotel** is a wonderfully rambling complex

Little Harbor apartments

of three old houses, tropically landscaped gardens and shady swimming pool. One of the few historic bed & breakfasts in Key West to accept children, this beautiful old hotel is close to the hustle and bustle of Duval Street and yet in a tranquil world all of its own. See p. 241.

Best Self-Catering Situated on the east side of Tampa Bay, close to both Tampa and Sarasota, **Little Harbor** is an ideal place to stay for families who want to explore Florida's west coast attractions but feel far away from the tourist-saturated areas. The apartments and town homes are well set up for families who prefer to self-cater and there's the added bonus of a good range of on-site restaurants if you don't want to cook after all. See p. 144.

Best Cowboy/Cowgirl-Friendly Accommodation **Westgate River Ranch** in central Florida is a place where American families hire cabins or park their RVs and enjoy the outdoors and time together. The ranch is relatively isolated but there are plenty of activities such as airboat rides, hayrides and bike hire to occupy children during the day and family-orientated entertainment, such as a Saturday night rodeo, to fill the evenings. See p. 112.

BEST EATING OPTIONS

Best Child-Friendly Restaurant **Morada Bay,** with its fantastic food, glorious sunset views and surrounding child-friendly sands, could be the best restaurant in so many categories, and is a highly recommended family-friendly dining experience for anyone spending time in the Florida Keys. See p. 237.

Best Seafood Perched on the edge of Apalachicola Bay, **Boss**

Oyster serves up seafood fresh from its surrounding waters, and while oysters are its speciality, there are plenty of other more child-friendly dishes to please all ages. See p. 265.

Best Dessert Desserts have never been better or bigger than those dished up at Captiva's eccentric **Bubble Room.** There are 14 devilishly delicious homemade puds to leave room for. See p. 141.

Best Family-Friendly Restaurant with an Airstrip **Chalet Suzanne,** in central Florida's Lake Wales, is probably the state's only restaurant with an airstrip, but is so good it's worth a mention in its own right. This glorious Swiss-style restaurant has sent its homemade soups into space to nourish NASA's astronauts, and Florida families come here to celebrate special events or just treat themselves to this establishment's divinely good food. See p. 108.

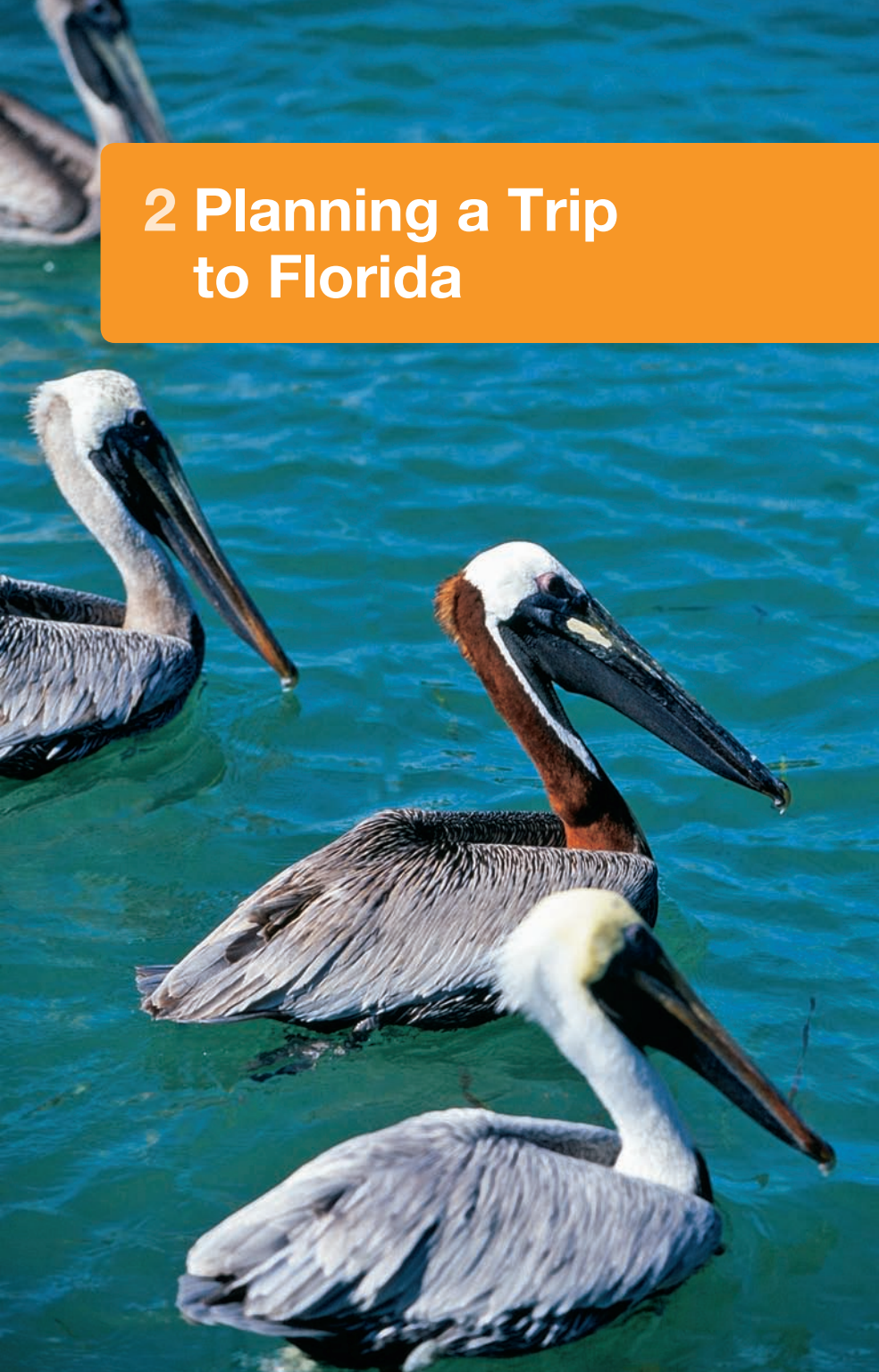
Best Breakfasts Spanning the corner of Collins Avenue and Espanola Way in Miami's South Beach, **Jerry's Famous Deli** is an iconic Art Deco diner, the decor and ambience of which is purely authentic and not specially created for the tourists. The breakfasts are delicious, but the menu is so long it might be lunchtime before every family member has made up their minds what to eat. See p. 203.

Lily Pond at Chalet Suzanne, Lake Wales

Best Theme Park Dining Experience Eating out with your children doesn't come wackier than MGM Studios' wonderfully bizarre **Sci Fi Dine-In,** where diners sit in recreated vintage convertible cars in a weird world of 1950s' drive-ins and low-budget B movies. See p. 83.

Best British Pub Grub Any Brit pining for a plate of fish and chips or bangers and mash should head for the **Rose & Crown** pub in Epcot's British Pavilion for a taste of what your local could look like if Disney took it over. Outside of the theme parks, the **Mucky Duck** on Captiva Island is popular with both locals and tourists and serves up good food and beer on the edge of a glorious and child-friendly beach. See p. 131.

Best Picnic Spot Just about all of Florida's state parks are perfect places to picnic and well set up with shady tables and often barbecue grills. However, **Honeymoon Island** on the central west coast, just north of Dunedin, is a wild and wonderful beach where seabirds nest, children play and the sunsets are spectacular. See p. 124.



2 Planning a Trip to Florida

FLORIDA

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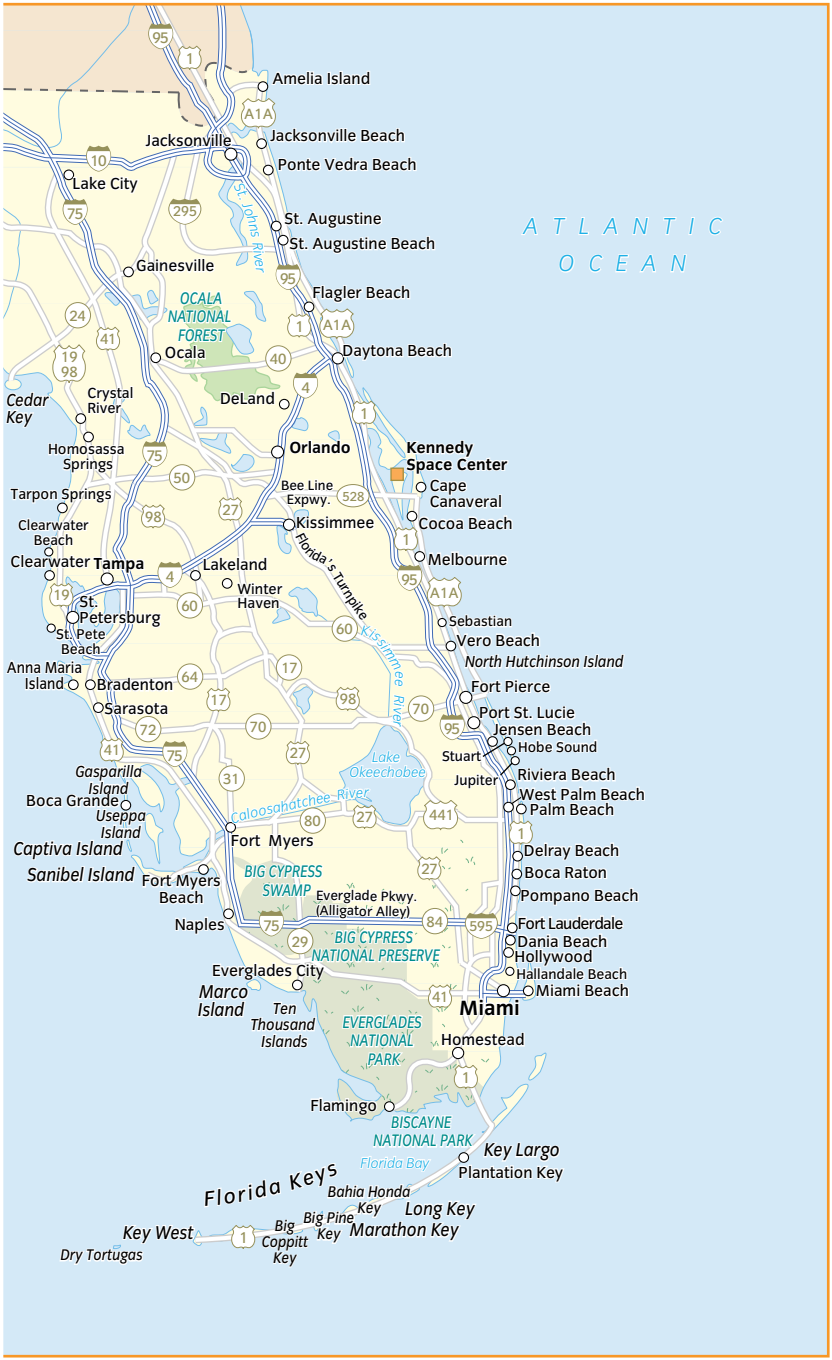
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Jacksonville Beach
Ponte Vedra Beach
Lake City
St. Augustine
St. Augustine Beach
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Gainesville
Flagler Beach
OCALA NATIONAL FOREST
Ocala
Daytona Beach
Cedar Key
Crystal River
DeLand
Homosassa Springs
Orlando
Kennedy Space Center
Cape Canaveral
Tarpon Springs
Bee Line Expwy.
Kissimmee
Cocoa Beach
Clearwater Beach
Clearwater
Tampa
Lakeland
Winter Haven
Florida's Turnpike
Melbourne
St. Petersburg
St. Pete Beach
Sebastian
Vero Beach
North Hutchinson Island
Anna Maria Island
Bradenton
Sarasota
Fort Pierce
Port St. Lucie
Jensen Beach
Hobe Sound
Stuart
Jupiter
Riviera Beach
West Palm Beach
Palm Beach
Gasparilla Island
Boca Grande
Useppa Island
Lake Okeechobee
Caloosahatchee River
Captiva Island
Fort Myers
Delray Beach
Sanibel Island
Fort Myers Beach
BIG CYPRESS SWAMP
Everglade Pkwy. (Alligator Alley)
Boca Raton
Pompano Beach
Naples
Fort Lauderdale
Dania Beach
BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL PRESERVE
Hollywood
Everglades City
Hallandale Beach
Marco Island
Ten Thousand Islands
Miami Beach
Miami
EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK
Homestead
Flamingo
BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK
Key Largo
Florida Bay
Plantation Key
Florida Keys
Bahia Honda Key
Long Key
Key West
Big Pine Key
Marathon Key
Big Coppitt Key
Dry Tortugas

Planning is the essential part of any trip and, far from being boring, if children are involved from the word go, preparing a trip to Florida as a family can be fun. The key to a successful trip is knowing what everyone wants out of it before you arrive. The choice of attractions and activities is as vast as the distances between them, so to avoid disappointment, and often save money, find out what everyone wants from the Sunshine State, while allowing some flexibility to fit in the unexpected. Also find out what's happening in the places you want to visit when you plan to be there, otherwise carefully laid plans could get disrupted by a large event or public holiday. The big advantage of taking children to Florida is that it's a popular destination for families, so standards are high and, with some off-the-beaten-track exceptions, you're never far away from 24-hour facilities.

For the purposes of this book Florida has been divided into the Major Attractions (i.e. the theme parks around Orlando and Tampa), followed by the division of the state into six large geographical regions.

INTERNAL US TRAVEL

Visitor Information

Contact **Visit Florida,** P.O. Box 1100, Tallahassee, FL 32302-1100, (*888 7 FLA USA, www.visitflorida.com*), the state's official tourism marketing agent, for a free comprehensive guide to the state. For information on Florida state parks, check their website, *www.floridastateparks.org*.

By Plane

Most major domestic airlines fly to and from many Florida cities. Choose from **American** (*800 433 7300, www.aa.com*); **Continental** (*800 525 0280, www.continental.com*); **Delta** (*800 221 1212, www.delta-air.com*); **Northwest/KLM** (*800 225 2525, www.nwa.com*); **United** (*800 241 6522, www.united.com*) and **US Airways** (*800 428 4322, www.usairways.com*). Of these, Delta and US Airways have the most extensive network of commuter connections within Florida.

Several so-called no-frills airlines – with low fares but few, if any, amenities – also fly to Florida. The biggest and best is **Southwest Airlines** (*800 435 9792, www.southwest.com*), which has flights from many US cities to Fort Lauderdale, Jackson, Orlando and Tampa.

Others flying to Florida include **AirTran** (*800 AIR TRAN, www.airtran.com*); **American Trans Air** (*800 435 9282, www.ata.com*); **Carnival Air** (*800 824 7386*), an arm of the popular cruise line; **JetBlue** (*800 538 2538, www.jetblue.com*); **Midwest Express** (*800 452 2022, www.midwestexpress.com*); **PanAm** (*800 FLY PANAM, www.flypanam.com*); and **Spirit** (*800 722 7117, www.spiritair.com*).

Frommers.com: The Complete Travel Resource

It should go without saying, but we highly recommend Frommers.com, voted Best Travel Site by PC Magazine. We think you'll find our expert advice and tips; independent reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions and preferred shopping and nightlife venues; holiday giveaways; and an online booking tool indispensable before, during and after your travels. We publish the complete contents of over 128 travel guides in our **Destinations** section, covering nearly 3,800 places worldwide to help you plan your trip. Each weekday, we publish original articles reporting on **Deals and News** via our free **Frommers.com Newsletter** to help you save time and money and travel smarter. We're betting you'll find our **Events** listings (***http://events.frommers.com***) an invaluable resource; it's an up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities everywhere – including concerts, festivals, lectures and more. We've also added weekly **podcasts, interactive maps, blogs, itinerary planners, photo galleries** and hundreds of new images across the site. Check out our **Travel Talk** area featuring **Message Boards** where you can join in conversations with thousands of fellow Frommer's travellers and post your trip report once you return.

Internet resources such as **Travelocity** (***www.travelocity.com***) and **Microsoft Expedia** (***www.expedia.com***) make it easy to compare prices and purchase tickets.

Family Friendly

Florida is a great family destination, with Walt Disney World leading the list of theme parks geared to young and old alike. Consequently, most Florida hotels and restaurants are willing, if not eager, to cater to families travelling with children. Many hotels and motels let children age 17 and younger stay free in a parent's room (be sure to ask when you reserve).

At the beaches, it's the exception rather than the rule for a resort not to have a children's activities programme (some will even mind the youngsters while the parents enjoy a night off!). Even if they don't have a children's programme of their own, most will arrange babysitting services.

Recommended family travel websites include **Family Travel Forum** (***www.familytravelforum.com***), a comprehensive site that offers customised trip planning; **Family Travel Network** (***www.familytravelnetwork.com***), an online magazine providing travel tips; and **TravelWithYourKids.com** (***www.travelwithyourkids.com***), a comprehensive site written by parents for parents offering sound advice for long-distance and international travel with children.

Surfing for Hotels

In addition to the online travel booking sites **Travelocity, Expedia, Orbitz, Priceline** and **Hotwire,** you can book hotels through **Hotels.com, Quikbook** (***www.quikbook.com***) and **Travelaxe** (***www.travelaxe.com***).

HotelChatter.com is a daily webzine offering smart coverage and critiques of hotels worldwide. Go to **TripAdvisor.com** or **HotelShark.com** for helpful independent consumer reviews of hotels and resort properties.

It's a good idea to get a confirmation number and print out any online booking transaction.

America's love affair with the Internet has revolutionised planning for a trip to the States. Florida's official tourism website ***www.visitflorida.com*** is a huge information portal, with updated articles, accommodation information, links to tourist information for cities and communities around the state and a section specifically for UK visitors (***www.visitflorida.com/uk***), which includes special deals in UK prices and up-to-date currency exchange information. The Florida section of the Visit USA site (***www.visitusa.org.uk***) is also worth consulting and is tailored to a UK audience.

Other websites to explore are: ***www.floridabeachesguide.com*** and ***www.florida-secrets.com***.

Details of regional visitor information websites have been included in each chapter.

Child-Specific Websites

Visit Florida's site has a section specifically for families (***www.visitflorida.com/family***), which includes special family-focused articles and blogs. Family Travel Times (***www.familytraveltimes.com***) is a US-based newsletter dedicated to improving family holidays; some articles are free and some are for subscribers only. For tips on surviving theme parks with children visit ***www.familyfun.go.com/vacations/***. Other, more general, sites geared towards travelling families are ***www.travellingwithchildren.co.uk***, ***www.takethefamily.com*** and ***www.babygoes2.com***.

UK & INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS

Entry Requirements & Customs

Passports & Visas

Most British visitors to the US travel under the US Visa Waiver Program, which allows you to stay in the United States for up to 90 days if you're travelling on holiday.

You will only qualify for this programme if you are described as a 'British Citizen' on the photograph page of your passport. If you are described as a 'British Subject', 'British National (Overseas)', 'British Overseas Territories Citizen', 'British Dependent Territories Citizen', 'British Protected Person' or

'British Overseas Citizen', you need a visa.

All family members, including children and babies, travelling to the US must have individual passports with at least 6 months left from the final day of your visit before it expires (if you update your passport early, the British authorities will add the months left on to your next passport). In addition, if your passport is not a new biometric version, it must have a machine-readable zone (marked by three chevrons on the photo page).

The US Department of Homeland Security requires visitors to register with their Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) no later than 72 hours before travelling to the US. Visit ***https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov*** and follow instructions on how to submit an application for authorisation. You do not need to submit an application to ESTA if you are entering the US by land.

Restrictions are in place for anyone who has a criminal record or has overstayed on a previous visit. If you've any concerns about your passport or whether or not you qualify for the US Visa Waiver Program, check the tourism section of the US Embassy's website (***www.usembassy.org.uk***), or call its Visa Information Line *0904 245 0100*. Be warned, calls are charged at £1.20 per minute and the Embassy may keep you hanging on for quite a while.

During your flight you will be issued with an immigration form, on which you have to state the length of your stay in the US and an address (including postcode) for at least the first night of your visit. Part of this form will be stapled to your passport when you pass through immigration and it must remain there until it is removed by an airline official when you leave. Also, on entry into the US, all visitors aged between 14 and 79 will have their fingerprints scanned and be digitally photographed.

Airport Security & Flying Restrictions

For up-to-date information on airport security and flying restrictions check ***www.dft.gov.uk/transportforyou/airtravel/airportsecurity***.

The main points to remember when flying to the US are:

- Passengers are restricted to one item of cabin baggage with a maximum size of 56 centimetres x 45 centimetres x 25 centimetres. Other bags (e.g. handbags) may be carried inside this single item of cabin baggage.

- All items containing liquids or creams must go into your hold baggage, as there are strict restrictions on the quantity of liquids that can be taken on board. Passengers can only carry separate containers, with a capacity not greater than 100 millilitres, of liquids and creams onto a plane. These containers must be placed inside a transparent, re-sealable plastic bag, which

itself must not exceed 1 litre in capacity (approximately 20cm x 20cm). Each passenger is limited to one bag and must present it separately for examination at the airport.

- Liquid baby food or sterilised water, sufficient for the journey, can be taken on board, however, the accompanying adult may be asked to taste it to prove that it's baby food. The same applies to essential liquid dietary foodstuffs.

- If you need to take on board any essential medicines that you'll need in quantities higher than 100 millilitres, you must obtain permission from your airline and the airport you are departing from. Bring supporting documentation from a relevant qualified medical professional when you travel.

INSIDER TIP

To state the obvious, never make a flippant remark about bombs or terrorism when in a US airport.

Customs

Entering the US

Visitors aged 21 and over may bring 1 litre of alcohol, 200 cigarettes, 100 cigars or 3 pounds of tobacco and gifts worth up to £50 into the US without paying duty. Any product of Cuban origin, including cigars, may not be brought into the US and a number of food items, including cheese, fresh fruit and meat products, are prohibited.

Coming Home

Visitors to Florida can bring home 200 cigarettes or 100 cigarillos or 50 cigars or 250 grams of tobacco, 1 litre of spirits or strong liqueurs over 22% volume or 2 litres of fortified wine, 16 litres of beer and 4 litres of still wine, plus other goods worth up to £390.

INSIDER TIP

Take photocopies of all your essential travel documents and carry them in a separate bag to the originals. If you can access your e-mail account online, e-mail yourself passport and ticket numbers, travel insurance details and the emergency telephone numbers you'll need to cancel any credit cards. If you can't access your normal e-mail account away from home, open a free Hotmail (***www.hotmail.com***) or Yahoo (***www.yahoo.com***) account.

MONEY

The US Dollar

Florida, along with the rest of the US, uses the dollar as its currency. There are 100 cents to a dollar, with notes for US$1 to US$100 and coins for 1, 5, 10 and 25 cents. Older notes (still in circulation) are green and all look very similar. The dollar amounts and pictures of different presidents differentiate each one. Newer bills are also distinguished by colour. In 2007 a US$1 coin was also introduced into circulation. These coins also feature presidents in the order that they served, with four

What Things Cost in Florida

A gallon of petrol	US$2.90
Hire of a medium-sized car for a week	US$350
Round trip airfare between Orlando and Pensacola	US$450
Taxi fare from Orlando International Airport to Walt Disney World	US$60
Admission to a zoo, adult	US$13
Admission to a zoo, child aged 3 to 12	US$8
British newspaper	US$2.25
Fixed price child's menu at a mid-priced restaurant	US$4.99
Road toll	US$1 to US$2
Parking at a theme park	US$12
A pair of mouse ears at Walt Disney World	US$12
A pint of beer at the Rose & Crown pub in Epcot	US$8
Slice of pizza from a takeaway counter	US$3
A litre of milk in a supermarket	US$1.30
A litre of orange juice in a supermarket	US$1.99
A litre of still water in a supermarket	89¢
1 pound of bananas in a supermarket	69¢
A pack of 40 disposable nappies	US$15
750 grams of baby formula	US$17
Pack of 2 jars of baby food	US$2

different ones being introduced each year. At the time of writing, the US dollar–sterling exchange rate is US$1 to 66p. For up-to-date exchange rates and a currency converter, see ***www.xe.com***.

There's no limit on the amount of money you may bring with you into Florida. However, if you're travelling with more than US$10,000 in currency or travellers' cheques, you must declare it to a Customs Inspector.

INSIDER TIP

25 cent coins, known as quarters, are useful to collect, as they're used in a variety of situations from laundry machines in motels to parking meters.

Credit & Debit Cards

It's essential to carry a credit card when travelling in Florida, as you'll need one to secure accommodation, organise car hire and sometimes to show at immigration to prove that you've enough funds to finance your stay. Most accommodation and dining options, shops and petrol stations accept credit cards. The best ones to travel with are Visa and MasterCard, as many small establishments don't accept American Express and Diners' Club is fading in popularity.

I've used credit cards all over Florida and have never been asked for a PIN, but make sure

Saving on Ticket Prices

It can work out cheaper to buy tickets to Florida's major attractions in advance of your visit.

Cheap tickets are available in the UK from Attraction Tickets Direct (*0845 130 3876*, ***www.attraction-tickets-direct.co.uk***). While in Florida you can find discount booklets containing vouchers to attractions, accommodation and restaurants all over the place, including visitor information centres, supermarkets and petrol stations.

If you're planning to visit a lot of historic sites, joining the Florida Trust might save you money. A household membership, which includes two adults and all under 18s, costs US$50 and allows free or reduced entrance to around 80 historic sites in the state; check ***www.floridatrust.org*** for details.

you know yours just in case. Inform your card company that you're going away so they don't block your card when they see it being used frequently in an unusual place.

You will not be able to use debit cards in shops or restaurants, but can use them at ATMs to withdraw cash.

For lost or stolen cards see p. 46.

INSIDER TIP

The Post Office credit card does not add commission on purchases overseas, making it the cheapest way to buy things on credit abroad as long as you pay it off as soon as you get home. Visit ***www.postoffice.co.uk*** for more information.

Travellers' Cheques

Although now relatively obsolete in a world crammed with 24-hour ATMs, travellers' cheques are the safest way to travel if you want to take large amounts of money with you and they are accepted at most locations. Keep a record of the serial numbers so you can make a claim in the event of loss or theft, and carry them separately from your money and any form of identification.

Cash Points

You'll find 24-hour cash points or ATMs in banks (look out for drive thru ATMs), grocery stores, shopping malls, petrol stations, supermarkets, hotels and theme parks. Those located in smaller establishments, such as convenience stores, may charge a fee to use and limit the amount you can withdraw to US$100.

WHEN TO GO

Different areas of Florida have different high and low seasons determined by the weather.

Average temperatures in the different regions of Florida (°F/°C)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
North	53/12	56/13	63/17	68/20	72/22	78/26	81/27	81/27	77/25	74/23	66/19	59/15
Central	60/16	63/17	66/19	71/22	78/26	82/28	82/28	82/28	81/27	75/24	67/19	61/16
South	68/20	70/21	71/22	74/23	78/26	81/27	82/28	84/29	81/27	78/26	73/23	70/21
Keys	69/21	72/22	74/23	77/25	80/27	82/28	85/29	85/29	84/29	80/27	74/23	72/22

South Florida, with its subtropical climate, has a high season from mid-December to mid-April when everyone escapes cold temperatures elsewhere. In the north, high season lasts from May until September when the temperatures are high but not as unbearably hot as the south. Spring and autumn can be pleasant times in all areas of the state and all tourist areas are busy and expensive at Christmas, Easter and other public holidays (see p. 45 for a list of Florida's public holidays).

Be wary of American college students' Spring Break holidays, up to a 6-week span beginning in late February. Some beach destinations are very popular with spring breakers and these have been indicated in the main body of this book. In addition, each spring major league baseball teams from all over North America travel to Florida to train and pre-season games pull in huge crowds, making it difficult to find accommodation in the towns and cities where they are playing. Details of when and where matches are played can be found on the Major League Baseball's website (***www.mlb.com***) and the Florida Sports Foundation's website (***www.flasports.com***) from late January onwards.

WHAT TO PACK

The important factors to consider when packing for children travelling to Florida are how to keep them entertained while travelling long distances and how to protect them from the heat and mosquitoes. For details on how to keep children entertained on car journeys, see p. 33 and for advice on staying safe in the sunshine, see p. 22.

There's always a tendency to over-pack when travelling with children and flying is far easier the lighter you travel. Toiletries, nappies, clothes and feeding equipment are all available and inexpensive in Florida, so there's no need to travel with too many bulky items. When packing clothes, remember that the dress code is casual wherever you stay. Child safety seats for cars can be rented from car-hire companies and buggies can be rented at the main attractions. Almost all accommodation options have cots, coin-operated washing machines and dryers on site, many resorts rent baby monitors

Hurricane Season

A hurricane is a tropical storm that forms over the Atlantic with wind speeds of over 75 mph. These storms are categorised via the Saffir–Simpson Scale, starting at a Category 1 storm containing gusts of less than 77 mph, which cause minor damage, and rising to a potentially catastrophic Category 5 hurricane with wind speeds of over 175 mph.

Hurricane season officially lasts from June to November, with August to October being the most active months. There's no reason not to travel to Florida then; it's unlikely that one will affect your holiday and if it does, most resorts have evacuation procedures in place and most package tour operators will work with airlines and hotels to ensure that minimum disruption occurs. However, if you plan to travel to Florida during hurricane season, check both your tour operator's small print and travel insurance. For up-to-date hurricane information, check the National Hurricane Center's website, ***www.nhc.noaa.gov***.

(check ahead) and most restaurants have highchairs.

The following are essential items to travel with or buy as soon as you arrive:

- Sunglasses – check ***www.frubishades.com*** for funky and effective child sunglasses
- Sun hats and high-factor sunscreen
- Basic first-aid kit including rehydration salts
- Wet wipes
- A nightlight if your child is afraid of the dark
- A fold-up cooler bag if you intend to picnic
- Rain ponchos for the inevitable downpour
- Lightweight, long-sleeved tops to avoid your child getting sunburnt
- Lightweight jackets
- Comfortable shoes
- Mosquito repellent

www.travellingwithchildren.co.uk stocks an excellent range of clothes, shoes and accessories for young travellers including inexpensive child identity wrist bands, a must for small children in any theme park.

HEALTH, INSURANCE & SAFETY

Travel Insurance

Never travel to Florida without adequate insurance for all family members, as paying for medical attention while you're there costs a small fortune. If your package tour operator does not offer insurance, shop around, as prices

vary enormously from one provider to the next. The Post Office (*www.postoffice.co.uk*) and Columbus Direct (*www.columbusdirect.com*) both offer reasonably priced travel insurance. Also check *www.travelinsuranceweb.com* for a comparative quote.

Staying Healthy

The primary health concerns when travelling to Florida are the heat and sun. Always protect yourself and your children with a high-factor sunscreen or sun block (SPF 45 for children) at least half an hour before exposure and remember to reapply several times during the day, especially after swimming. Make sure your children wear sunglasses – attach them on a cord around their necks so they don't lose them – and a sun hat to protect their heads. Also make sure they drink plenty of fluids as heat exhaustion and heat stroke are often triggered by lack of drinking. If you're hiring a car, buy a car shade (they are relatively inexpensive), as temperatures soar when cars are parked in the sun. The hottest times are 11am to 3pm, when it's a good idea to be inside or in the shade.

Dehydration can occur with prolonged exposure to the heat and sun, even in Florida's winter months, and if your children are suddenly cranky for no good reason, the chances are they're dehydrated. If you plan to be out all day, carry bottled water – Florida's tap water is fine to drink – and salted crisps. Salt replacement drinks are plentiful in supermarkets and convenience stores, with Gatorade being the most popular brand; these should be drunk on a regular basis. Carry rehydration salts with you – while it's easy to buy them with no added sugar in the UK, it's impossible to find sugar-free options in the US.

INSIDER TIP

Dehydration can also occur on a car journey if the windows are closed and the air conditioning is turned on, as this creates a very dry atmosphere.

Mosquitoes are often a problem in Florida, so have a repellent handy, especially in southern Florida, in parks and on trails. Ask 10 people for advice on keeping mosquitoes away and you'll get 11 answers, I swear by Avon Skin So Soft, soft and fresh dry oil body spray (*www.avon.uk.com*). Although it's not meant to be a repellent, mosquitoes hate the stuff and I've never been bitten while wearing it. However, whatever product you choose, remember that many people are allergic to DEET. If you're travelling to the Keys or Everglades with a baby, buy a mosquito net for the cot. Although Florida's mosquitoes have been known to carry West Nile Virus, it's very rare.

No vaccinations are required for travelling to Florida. Check *www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk* for full details on health risks in the US.

Florida's Beach Warning Flags

Florida's public beaches operate a flag system, alerting visitors to unsafe surf conditions. These are what the different coloured flags mean:

- Red with a line crossing out a swimmer – Water is closed to the public.
- Red – High hazard, high surf and/or storm currents.
- Yellow – Medium hazard, moderate surf and/or currents.
- Green – Low hazard, calm conditions but still exercise caution.
- Purple – Dangerous marine life is present, e.g. jellyfish.

The absence of a flag doesn't necessarily mean the water is safe. Check with a lifeguard to be sure.

If You Fall Ill

If you or your youngsters fall ill in Florida, your tour representative or hotel or resort receptionist will provide information on the nearest doctors' surgery. If there's no one you can ask for help, look under 'clinics' or 'physicians and surgeons' in the Yellow Pages and try to find someone who will charge your insurance company rather than asking you to pay up front. If you do have to pay for treatment or medication, keep the receipts so that you can claim any expense incurred from your travel insurance company when you get home.

Travelling Safely with Children in Florida

With the exception of big cities, the crime rate is relatively low in Florida and you're unlikely to experience problems. However,

Enjoy the beaches safely

always take basic precautions while travelling including:

- Keep all valuables, airline tickets, passports and other travel documents locked in a hotel safe.
- Never leave purses, wallets, luggage or other valuables in sight in an empty car; if you must leave them in your vehicle, lock them in the boot.
- If you're driving somewhere for a night out, park under a streetlight or in a well-lit area.
- If you're unsure about going somewhere at night, seek advice from your hotel reception.
- Drive with your car doors locked and try to stay on main roads.
- Carry credit cards or travellers' cheques instead of large amounts of cash.
- Avoid wearing expensive jewellery and carrying valuable items.
- If hit from behind while driving, indicate to the other driver to follow you to a public place and call *911* for police help.
- If you're hiring a car, have a mobile phone with you in case you break down in the middle of nowhere (for details of mobile phones, see p. 28).
- Have a plan in place in case you get separated in a large attraction.
- Always lock the sliding doors on to your hotel balcony.

INSIDER TIP

The UK's Foreign Office website contains up-to-date information and advice on travel safety, see ***www.fco.gov.uk/travel***.

Beach Safety

Rip currents or riptides are strong currents that can carry even the most experienced swimmer out to sea. More than 100

Are Sting Rays Safe?

Following the death of naturalist Steve Irwin from a sting ray barb, some attractions in Florida offering visitors the chance to swim or snorkel with sting rays received a lot of attention from press and visitors who wanted to know if it's safe to get into the water with these marine animals. Some attractions, such as Discovery Cove in Orlando (see p. 76), file or trim sting rays' barbs. Others, including Theater of the Sea in the Florida Keys, house sting rays that have been born into captivity for many generations and have no fear of humans. However, if you're concerned about letting your children get up close to sting rays, seek assurances from the keepers at the park you are visiting.

people are killed by rip currents every year in the US. If you get caught in one, don't panic because they pull you out to sea but not under the water. Swim parallel to the shoreline until you're out of the rip current's influence. If you are unable to swim, tread water until you are out of the current. Then swim diagonally back to shore. Check ***www.usla.org/ripcurrents*** for more information.

Undertows can occur on steeply sloped beaches when an outgoing wave flows into an incoming one. An undertow can pull swimmers under the water and, as with rip currents, it's important to stay calm and go with the current until you are past the wave.

Jellyfish are fairly common in the oceans around Florida and are often found in the shallow waters near the shore or lying on the beach. Check the water before entering and if you are stung and have an allergic reaction, seek medical advice.

Topless sunbathing and thong bikinis are prohibited on Florida's beaches and it's illegal to take glass containers onto the sand.

Always use wooden boardwalks to enter a beach where provided, as they are in place to protect sand dunes from erosion.

INSIDER TIP

If you're concerned about the cleanliness of the beach you're visiting, check the website of the Blue Flag programme, America's environmental certification programme for beaches, ***www.cleanbeaches.org***. This site contains a list of all the clean beaches in the US.

Staying Safe on Off-Road Trails

If you're taking your children on hiking trails, always avoid direct contact with, and never attempt to feed or harass, any wild animals you may encounter. Supervise children when they are playing around or near water as this is prime alligator habitat. Only ever swim in clear water and never swim in areas that may be inhabited by alligators. Although there are poisonous snakes in Florida, it's very rare to encounter one, but if you're taking your family into wilderness areas, buy a snakebite kit from a camping store as a precaution.

Poison ivy is a common problem on trails. Coming into contact with the sap of this plant can, for some, result in a rash, swelling or big watery blisters breaking out on the skin within a few hours, or even a few days of contact. Steroid cream or cortisone should do the trick, but complications can arise if the blisters become infected, so seek medical advice if this happens. Learning to identify and avoid poison ivy is a big help – see ***http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep220*** for information on how to do this. This website is for the Institute of Food and Agriculture at the University of Florida, it is a useful and succinct piece on poison ivy.

Lightning is a real hazard in Florida. It kills around 10 people and injures many more each year. Summer is the peak season for lightning strikes, but they can happen at any time. If you can hear thunder you are within striking distance of the storm so seek shelter indoors or inside your car and wait at least 30 minutes after the last thunder clap before going outside. Stay well away from swimming pools and water and if a member of your party is struck 911 immediately. If the person has stopped breathing, find a qualified first aider who will perform CPR. For more information on lightning safety, see ***www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov***.

INSIDER TIP

An obvious sign that you're on holiday is the pile of post that builds up at the front door. To avoid this happening, Royal Mail operates a Keepsafe service through which all your post is held while you're away and delivered the first working day after you return. The cost of this service starts at £8.95 for up to 17 days. Call into a Post Office or visit ***www.royalmail.com*** for more information.

SPECIALISED RESOURCES

For Single Parents

The US-based website ***www.singleparenttravel.net*** is full of good advice about travelling in the States with children as a lone parent. I advise single parents to use resorts, as the lively pools, children's clubs and organised events give parents an opportunity to interact with other adults.

INSIDER TIP

Virgin Holidays offer single parent deals at some of their Orlando hotels. Check ***www.virginholidays.co.uk*** for further information.

For Grandparents

Florida's population has a high percentage of retired people and their numbers are boosted considerably each year by thousands of older people from Canada and the northern US who travel to Florida to escape cold winters elsewhere (these annual visitors are known as snowbirds). As such, older people are well catered for and often enjoy discounts at attractions; some US airlines also offer reduced travel to 'seniors'.

If you're travelling alone with your grandchildren, carry a letter of consent from the parents giving permission for any emergency medical care that the child may need. If you have a medical condition yourself, either tell the child so they're aware of it or carry written details with you in case of an emergency – your grandchild may be unable to articulate what the problem is.

AARP's (American Association of Retired Persons) website, ***www.aarp.org***, contains some useful travel tips and a message board through which you can search for and seek advice.

Families with Special Needs

Travelling with Essential Medical Equipment

Passengers are allowed to carry on board medical equipment essential for use during the flight. Where possible, the equipment should be contained within the one item of cabin baggage (see p. 17) and accompanied by supporting documentation from a relevant qualified medical professional.

Accessibility

All hotels and motels are required by law to have accessible rooms equipped for wheelchairs. Most parks and all public buildings, including museums, are wheelchair accessible (with some offering wheelchair hire) and have adapted toilets. All public transport is wheelchair accessible and there's plenty of accessible parking throughout the state, including at all the major attractions.

Most car-hire companies provide hand-controlled vehicles (book in advance) and to obtain a temporary, 90-day handicapped parking permit, bring your Blue Badge permit and at least one form of identification to a local tax collector's office upon entering the state. You cannot obtain one in advance online. For a list of tax collector locations and more information, visit ***www.hsmv.state.fl.us***.

The Orlando Visitor Center's website features an excellent section on travelling to central Florida with special needs, ***www.orlandoinfo.com/specialneeds***. Other useful resources include the Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality, ***www.sath.org***, and Holiday Care (*0845 124 9971*, ***www.holidaycare.org.uk***).

If you're booking a package tour or flight, make the company aware of any special needs your family may have.

THE 21ST-CENTURY TRAVELLER

Mobile Phones

Before taking your mobile phone to the US, check that it will work there and what the charges will be, and remember to purchase an adapter so you can recharge it. Even if your company does have a network in Florida, it may be weak in rural areas so check the coverage section of your provider's website before you leave home. If you're hiring a car, it's essential to carry a mobile in case you break down. One solution is to hire a cellular phone with the car; most major rental companies offer this service. An alternative, and often expensive option, is to rent a phone through companies such as Triptel (***www.triptel.com***).

Finding a Bargain Online

There's a multitude of travel-related websites, through which the discerning traveller can find a bargain. Here's a few to get you started:

For holidays check: ***www.expedia.com***, ***www.ebookers.com***, ***www.travelzoo.co.uk***, ***www.shermanstravel.com*** and ***www.travelsupermarket.com***.

For flights check: ***www.cheapflights.co.uk***, ***www.dohop.com***, ***www.ufly4less.com*** and ***www.skyscanner.net***.

For hotel rooms and villas check: ***www.laterooms.com***, ***www.holiday-rentals.co.uk***, ***www.midashotels.com*** and ***www.hotelkingdom.com***.

Other Phones

For information on telephones and making calls in the US, see p. 47.

The Internet

Visitors to Florida will have no problem accessing the Internet. If you're travelling with a laptop, most accommodation options have a wireless service that's free to log on to. Many hotels and resorts also have guest computer facilities, especially those that cater for business travellers, but some may charge a fee. Internet cafés are plentiful in tourist areas or head for the nearest public library, as they offer free computer and Internet access.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

By Package Tour Most families travelling to Florida do so on a package tour, and the choice of locations that operators offer is growing all the time. Many operators offer the flexibility to incorporate more than one location into a holiday package. Your local travel agent will have full details of package tour operators to Florida or you can check out last-minute deals online. Booking online is often cheaper than through an agent or with tour operators on the telephone. Tour operators to Florida include:

First Choice *0871 220 7799*, ***www.firstchoice.co.uk***

Funway *0870 444 0770*, ***www.funwayholidays.co.uk***

My Travel *0871 664 7970*, ***www.mytravel.co.uk***

Thomas Cook *0870 750 5711*, ***www.thomascook.com***

Travel City Direct *0871 911 2576*, ***www.travelcitydirect.com***

Car Hire Pitfalls

It's not illegal to drive without car insurance in the US, and big companies often quote visitors a price for car hire that doesn't include insurance, without telling you that this is the case. Insurance costs about the same amount again as car hire, so when getting a quote make sure it includes adequate insurance to cover all occupants of your vehicle and third-party claims, including personal injury. When obtaining a quote, ask the company to send you the quote in writing or via e-mail, and print and take it with you when picking up the car. There have been many incidents of visitors being assured that their quote covers everything, only to find on picking up the car they have to pay a whole lot more than expected or drive uninsured. If your deal isn't what you expected, complain loudly and ask for information on how to make a formal complaint. Also when picking up your car expect a hard sell of upgrades and added extras you probably don't need.

Virgin *0870 990 4215*, ***www.virginholidays.co.uk***

For additional tour operators or information on choosing a reputable company, consult ABTA (***www.abta.com***) or the Association of Independent Tour Operators (***www.aito.co.uk***).

If you're planning to visit Walt Disney World only, their UK website (***www.disneyworld.co.uk***) has full information on how to plan and book a holiday directly with them and ***www.wdisneyw.co.uk*** is a useful, unofficial, site for would-be Disney visitors. To book directly with Universal Orlando, check ***www.universalorlando.co.uk***.

By Plane If you're looking for a flight to Florida, the easiest option is to fly direct to Orlando, as a number of large airlines operate direct services between Orlando's airports (see p. 93) and British airports, both in London and around the country. Every year, over 1,500 flights depart from Gatwick alone to Orlando, with hundreds more leaving from Manchester, Birmingham, Doncaster–Sheffield, East Midlands, Newcastle, Glasgow, Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin. The main companies to run these services are Virgin Atlantic (***www.virgin-atlantic.com***), British Airways (***www.britishairways.com***), Thomas Cook Airlines (***www.thomascookairlines.co.uk***) and Thomson (***www.thomson.co.uk***). Virgin Atlantic also operates a regular, direct service between London Heathrow and Miami, while British Airways has a programme of regular flights between London Gatwick and Tampa, as well as London Heathrow and Miami.

INSIDER TIP

If you're looking for inspiration on how to make your trip to Florida different for your children, check out *www.dosomethingdifferent.com*. This company organises once-in-a-lifetime experiences from astronaut training to hot air balloon rides over central Florida.

Getting Around

By Car Hiring a car is the only real option for most families travelling around Florida with children in tow. If car hire is not part of your package tour, the major companies who have outlets all over the state and at the main airports are:

Avis *www.avis.com*

Budget *www.budget.com*

Dollar *www.dollar.com*

Hertz *www.hertz.com*

Children aged under 4 or weighing less than 40 pounds, must travel in an approved child car seat; these are available from car-hire companies. Additional extras that can be hired along with your car include cellular phones, satellite navigation systems and DVD players for children to watch in the car. Some companies, such as Hertz, offer green cars that emit less CO2.

I've only ever been asked for the photo card part of my licence, but it's recommended that anyone wanting to drive in Florida carries the green paper counterpart.

INSIDER TIP

Avoid using petrol stations near car-hire centres to fill up before returning your vehicle, as they are often more expensive.

For details on getting around central Florida without a car, see p. 94, and for details of a ferry service between Fort Myers and Key West, see p. 217.

Driving – The Rules of Florida's Roads

Anyone planning to drive in Florida should take time to learn the rules of their roads, as there are some marked differences between driving in the US and the UK. These are the main points to consider before getting behind the wheel of your hire car:

- You have to be 21 or over to hire a car and have held a full driving licence for at least a year whatever your age.
- Most hire cars are automatic.
- Drive on the right-hand side of the road.
- All front seat passengers and passengers under 18 must wear a seat belt, or be restrained in a federally-approved child seat.
- Carry a valid driving licence and proof of insurance at all times.
- Florida's official speed limit is 55 mph, which rises to 70 mph on some interstates and drops to as low as 20 mph in a

Sample Mileages in between Florida's Cities

Cities	Distance	Driving Time (hours)
Daytona to Jacksonville	89 miles	2
Miami to Fort Lauderdale	25 miles	0.5
Miami to Fort Myers	144 miles	3
Miami to Key West	153 miles	3.5
Orlando to Apalachicola	296 miles	6
Orlando to Daytona	54 miles	1
Orlando to Fort Myers	152 miles	3
Orlando to Miami	232 miles	5
Orlando to Tallahassee	244 miles	5.5
Orlando to Tampa	85 miles	2
Pensacola to Key West	790 miles	19
Tallahassee to Jacksonville	163 miles	3.5
Tallahassee to Pensacola	191 miles	4

school zone when children are present.

- Interstate and major roads will also often have a minimum speed limit of 40 mph. Legal limits, which are posted on the right-hand side of the road, are strictly enforced and fines are doubled when road workers are present. Even if you're in the middle of nowhere on a Sunday afternoon and think you can get away with putting your foot down, you can't. There's always heavy police presence on Florida's roads.

- At a traffic light controlled junction you can turn right on a red light after coming to a complete stop, unless there's a sign stating 'no right on red'.

- You must turn your headlights on if it's foggy, raining or if there's smoke in the air, e.g. if you drive in an area near a forest fire, but turn your windscreen wipers off when stopping at a tollbooth.

- If you pass a police car parked on the hard shoulder helping a motorist or pulling someone over for speeding, you must move to the far lane, away from the police.

- It's the law to yield to buses and let them back into traffic.

- If a school bus stops to let children on or off, all other traffic stops. Even if you're driving on the opposite side of the road, you must stop when a school bus does. Also, school zone speed limits are strictly enforced.

- Driving under the influence of alcohol is illegal and considered to be a serious crime. The legal limit for blood alcohol level is lower than in the UK and a zero tolerance attitude prevails if you're caught driving over the limit. Fines and suspensions are

heavy, especially if you're driving with children, and it's best not to drink at all if you plan to drive.

- Road junctions are not marked in numerical order. The numbers indicate the number of miles from the start of the road, e.g. junction 55 is 55 miles from the start of the road.

- A flashing yellow light is a caution sign and they're usually found at crossroads or when emergency vehicles are present, e.g. outside a fire station. You have right of way but should be aware that other traffic may pull out onto the road.

- A flashing red light is a warning that there's a stop sign at a junction ahead where you must stop.

- When stopping at a red traffic light, remember there's no amber light and it will just change straight to green. There is an amber light between green and red giving drivers plenty of time to slow down and stop.

- At a four-way stop, which is basically a crossroads that's not controlled by traffic lights, all cars must stop and then proceed in the order they arrived, give way to the car on your right if in doubt.

- Red stop signs are commonplace and you must come to a complete stop at them before proceeding, even if the road looks clear. A single flashing red light above a junction is the same as a stop sign.

- If a pedestrian is standing on the corner of the road waiting to cross, they have right of way and you must stop and let them cross (not that many drivers seem to, even though it's the law). Drivers must also always stop at zebra crossings, and if you need to drive across a pavement at any time, e.g. when driving out of a car park, you must stop before the pavement, check there are no

Keeping Children Entertained on the Road

Driving distances between towns and cities in Florida are vast and roads are generally boring for children – even driving from one side of Orlando to the other can take time and offer little in the way of interesting views. Larger car-hire companies offer the added extra of in-car DVD players and DVDs to keep back-seat passengers entertained. If you don't want your children to watch films in the car, keep them occupied with 'spot the number plates'. All US cars have number plates representing the state they're from and it's fun to look out for these (double points if you get Hawaii). Before leaving home, check the RAC's website (***www.rac.co.uk)*** for a list of top 10 car games and throughout the US, Universal Map (***www.universalmap.com***) sell a range of children's travel activities to keep young travellers occupied.

pedestrians, and then drive to the edge of the road to check for traffic before turning.

- It's illegal to park against the flow of traffic and don't park within 10 feet of a water hydrant; you'll get clamped or towed away.

- It's illegal to make a 'U' turn when an unbroken white line runs down the middle of the road – these are usually found on interstates.

- It's illegal to change lanes across double yellow solid lines, double white solid lines and a single yellow solid line on your side of a broken yellow line unless you're turning left into a private driveway. You can change lanes through a single white or yellow lines but it is discouraged – these are usually found at large junctions when traffic has committed to a lane and changing to another one could be difficult or dangerous.

- It's a good idea when approaching a junction to know whether you want to head north, south, east or west, as all roads are signposted in the direction they lead. On smaller roads there's often little in the way of prior warning before a junction, so you have to make instant decisions.

- If you break down, pull over onto the hard shoulder and put on your hazard lights so that local police and other drivers know you need help. Breakdown cover should be included with your car hire (check at the time of hiring) and they will issue you with a number to call for breakdown service. If you don't have breakdown cover or need police help, call *347* to reach Florida's Highway Patrol or call *911* in an emergency. There are emergency call boxes roughly every half a mile on major interstates.

- If you're pulled over by the police, remember that Florida's police aren't famous for their sense of humour, so don't try to crack jokes. Also, never reach into the glove compartment, as the police officer may assume that you're reaching for a gun. Stay in your car, sit with your hands on the steering wheel and put on the inside car light if it's dark. If you've been pulled over for an offence such as speeding or driving through a red light, you'll be fined and given a ticket. Don't try to pay the fine on the spot as this could come across as bribery, instead let the police officer tell you how, when or where to pay.

- If possible, don't drive as soon as you arrive. Stepping straight off a long-haul flight into a hire car is not the best time to get used to a new road system and its rules. Have a coffee at the airport and refresh before collecting your car.

- And finally, don't let any of the above put you off driving in Florida. These might seem like draconian rules and regulations compared with the UK, but once you're used to it, driving in the US is much easier than

driving at home, and, outside of the traffic-clogged cities, it can be a lot of fun.

INSIDER TIP

Florida 511 is a free state-wide travel information service. *511* or visit *www.fl511.com* for real-time traffic information.

Different Types of Roads in Florida

Florida's road system consists of a number of different types of roads. The fastest and quickest to drive are interstates, which are the equivalent of motorways in the UK and identified by the letter 'I-' in this book, e.g. interstate 4 is depicted as I-4.

One down from interstates, and similar to 'A' roads in the UK, are US highways – major roads that often travel directly through towns and cities, rather than bypassing them like interstates. They also have slower speed limits than interstates and in this book have been identified by 'Hwy-' followed by the road's number, e.g. Hwy-41. Some 'scenic' versions of US highways exist, such as the A1A that runs down the east coast. These roads have lower speed limits but fantastic views.

More minor roads, and the equivalent of 'B' roads in the UK, are known as state or county roads (often called routes) and are identified by 'SR-' in this book, e.g. SR-60.

Florida also has a system of fast toll roads, of which the Florida Turnpike is the longest.

By Train The Florida Department of Transportation has recently been awarded funding to develop a network of high-speed rail services. Phase one will be the construction of a Tampa/Orlando service, with phase two linking Orlando with Miami. At the time of writing this project has only just been announced so check *www.floridahighspeedrail.org* for up-to-date information.

By Plane Although flying isn't the cheapest way to travel around Florida, it is the quickest and all areas are served by internal flights operated by major US airlines. If you do decide to travel internally by plane, book as far in advance as possible, as this is far cheaper than leaving it until the last minute. To give you a general idea of flying times, flights from Orlando to Miami and Tallahassee last an hour and flights to Key West and Pensacola an hour and a half. For information, schedules and prices for internal flights check:

American Airlines *www.aa.com*

Continental Airlines *www.continentalairlines.com*

Delta *www.delta.com*

Gulfstream *www.gulfstreamair.com*

US Airways *www.usairways.com*

Responsible Tourism

Whales & Dolphins in Captivity

The enormous controversy that rages around the ethics of keeping dolphins, whales and other

Gator swimming in the Everglades

marine animals in captivity for the purposes of entertaining humans was recently fuelled when a SeaWorld trainer was killed by one of the park's male killer whales. However, the arguments about whether or not to 'Free Willy' are complex and not clear-cut. If you would like your children to come into close contact with a dolphin or any other marine animal at one of Florida's attractions, but are concerned about animal cruelty, ask the organisation you're thinking of visiting where their whales and dolphins have come from. They might have been born in captivity and therefore be unable to survive in the wild or it might be a rescue animal and equally dependent upon human care. However, many whales and dolphins are captured in the wild, causing them great distress, and bought by some attractions to be trained to entertain. You might also want to ask how animals are trained; some organisations, such as Theater by the Sea in the Florida Keys, do not withhold food from animals as a means of training, while others do. For more information visit the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society's website, ***www.wdcs.org***.

It's also worth remembering that while nothing beats seeing a dolphin, or any animal, in its natural environment, human intervention in that environment is often as cruel as keeping an animal in captivity. For more information check the Marine Conservation's website, ***www.mcsuk.org*** or Seafood Watch, ***www.seafoodwatch.org***, which contains some good advice on the different types of seafood available in Florida's restaurants and supermarkets, such as which ones have been caught or farmed in environmentally friendly ways.

Florida's Wildlife in its Natural Habitat

When experiencing animals in their natural habitat, impress upon your children the difference between animals in the wild and those in captivity and be aware of the laws in place to protect Florida's abundant and magnificent wildlife. Just because a dolphin will roll over and be tickled in a theme park doesn't mean that it won't attack in the wild, and there have been many incidents of this happening when people get too close.

Also be aware that it's both a bad idea and illegal to feed animals such as alligators, dolphins and manatees in the wild, as this turns them into scavengers. There have been occasions when female dolphins will compete with their calves for food rather than teaching them how to hunt.

And, although it's overwhelmingly tempting to reach out and touch the docile manatee, this is also illegal, as any human interaction with this animal could potentially cause problems by taming them and diminishing their natural suspicion of humans.

INSIDER TIP

If you come across any discarded fishing line, chop it into tiny pieces and throw it away as it's very harmful to wildlife, especially birds.

Forest Fires

Forest fires are a constant problem in Florida and, although some are intentional and

Sea Turtles

From May to October sea turtles nest along the Florida's east coast. All species are endangered and there are a number of ways visitors can help reduce the damage human behaviour has on these ancient creatures:

- Sometimes nests are marked, but as a general rule when visiting beaches where turtles nest, walk close to the sea to prevent the sand above the nests compacting, making it hard for new-born baby turtles to dig their way out.
- Turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and try to eat them so don't throw any into the sea or leave them on the beach.
- If you come across a turtle while it's nesting, don't approach it. Keep a distance of 15 metres and don't shine any bright light at it. If disturbed or disorientated, the female will return to the sea before she has laid and dump her eggs in the sea.
- Never buy any products that are made from turtle shell.

For more information, and to book a place on a 'turtle watch', see ***www.seaturtlespacecoast.org***.

controlled, many are the result of lightning strikes or campfires that haven't been put out properly. In times of drought the risk of forest fires escalates and lighting ground fires or throwing away cigarette butts is prohibited. If you're considering lighting a campfire in one of Florida's state or national parks, look for the 'Smokey the Bear' sign – a cartoon brown bear in a ranger's hat – as he will indicate if the risk of forest fires in that area is low, moderate or high and whether or not you can light a fire.

Carbon Offsetting

An increasing number of travellers are choosing to carbon offset their flights. Although the only real 'green' solution is not to fly at all, carbon offsetting does reduce the negative impact on the environment that flying has. Two companies offer this service. Climate Care (*www.jpmorganclimatecare.com*) will calculate your emissions and charge a set fee that's put towards sustainable energy and forest restoration projects. At the time of writing, this company charges around £18 per passenger to offset a return flight to Orlando, depending on which UK airport you depart from.

If you're hiring a car, some companies, such as Hertz *www.hertz.com*, hire vehicles that emit less CO2.

Florida Green Lodging Program

Florida's Department of Environmental Protection runs a Green Lodging Program, which recognises accommodation that proves an environmental commitment. More about the scheme and designated properties can be found on the website, *www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging*, and throughout this guide any accommodation that is part of this scheme has been marked as GREEN.

General Information about Responsible Travel

Numerous organisations exist to promote sustainable tourism practices. Below are a number that will help you plan a family trip that will be as environmentally friendly as possible:

- *www.responsibletravel.com* helps travellers choose environmentally responsible tour operators and businesses.
- *www.tourismconcern.org.uk* works with communities to help reduce tourism's negative impact.
- *www.thetravelfoundation.org* is set up to help visitors care for the places they go to on holiday and includes an excellent children's section so youngsters get involved too.
- *www.ecotourism.org*, a US-based organisation, promotes travel to and preservation of natural areas and provides some useful definitions and facts around ecotourism.

ACCOMMODATION & EATING OUT

Accommodation

As a rule, accommodation is far cheaper and of a higher standard in Florida than in the UK. Accommodation options for families are either self-catering villas, large resorts, chain or privately owned hotels and chain motels. On the whole, exclusive boutique hotels and bed & breakfasts are where adults stay to be away from families and do not accept children. For the purposes of the reviews in this book, accommodation prices have been classified as:

Budget US$60–US$100

Moderate US$100–US$200

Expensive US$200–US$500

Very Expensive US$500 plus

Self-catering villas are abundant in tourist areas and are often the most cost-effective form of accommodation for families. Details of villa rental companies can be found in the accommodation sections of relevant chapters.

Most families travelling on package tours will stay in one of the many large resorts that dominate Florida's popular tourists areas and are well set up to cater for children of all ages. All have swimming pools and most contain children's pools, games rooms, family dining packages and children's clubs at the very least. If you book through a tour operator, all taxes should be included, but if you book independently or arrive as walk-ins, expect to pay a resort tax of between US$5 and US$30 in order to use the facilities on top of the usual room rate, as well as Florida tax (see p. 47).

Big hotels are plentiful in the main tourist centres and along the coast, and are often the only option in city centres. Most have a swimming pool and on-site restaurants and all rooms are en suite with air conditioning, telephones and cable TV, but they're unlikely to be as family focused as resorts.

The most economical accommodation option for families travelling on fly-drives or independently is chain motels, which can be found everywhere from the popular tourist stops to junctions off major roads. Motel rooms can be excellent value for money, as all have private bathrooms and most contain two double beds, cable TV, iron, safe, telephone, fridge, microwave, coffeemaker and hairdryer. It's usual for each motel to have its own swimming pool, coin-operated laundry facilities, cots and extra rollaway beds (for a fee). Adjoining rooms are often available. Here are the toll-free telephone numbers and websites of the main motel chains:

Best Western *1 800 780 723*, ***www.bestwestern.com***

Days Inn *1 800 329 7466*, ***www.daysinn.com***

Extended Stay America *1 800 426 7866*, ***www.extendedstayamerica.com***

Hampton Inn *1 800 426 7866*, ***www.hamptoninn.com***

Holiday Inn *1 800 465 4329*, ***www.holidayinn.com***

Howard Johnson *1 800 446 4656*, ***www.hojo.com***

La Quinta *1 800 642 4271*, ***www.lq.com***

Quality Inn, Comfort Inn and Econo Lodge *1 877 424 6423*, ***www.choicehotels.com***

If you're planning to use motel accommodation, pick up discount brochures from petrol stations, supermarkets and visitor centres, as you can save money by using the coupons they contain. However, it's unlikely you'll be able to use the coupons on Friday and Saturday nights when rates are higher than the rest of the week. Ultimately, however, they are far cheaper if you can book in advance online via discount travel sites (see p. 16).

Unless you've booked through a tour operator, all accommodation options will require a credit card number to secure a reservation.

Eating Out

With a few notable exceptions, family dining in Florida is inexpensive compared with the UK, but limited. For the purposes of the reviews in this book, dining prices for a main course have been classified as:

Budget US$6–US$10

Moderate US$10–US$20

Expensive US$20–US$30

Very Expensive US$30 plus

Budget options are mainly the big-name chains, branches of which are everywhere in the main tourist areas. Of these chains, Olive Garden (***www.olivegarden.com***) and Denny's (***www.dennys.com***) are the healthiest options and Pizza Huts are generally not as nice as branches in the UK.

American families are early eaters compared with Europeans and even popular restaurants can stop serving dinner as early as 9pm, so call ahead if you plan to eat somewhere other than a chain restaurant after this time.

Outside the major chains, the vast majority of Florida's restaurants are seafood oriented, with most serving some meat options. Dining out with a vegetarian member of the family can be a serious challenge, and a vegan or any other special dietary requirement even more so. Any restaurant serving Mexican food usually has vegetarian options and most will rustle up something without meat, but they prefer to have advance notice. Theme parks are a particular challenge for vegetarians, especially as many do not allow visitors to take in their own food. See the Family-Friendly Dining section of the Major Attractions

Ice-cream seller, seaside

chapter for further information, p. 82.

Most restaurants provide a children's menu, but these often consist of little more than burgers, fries and hot dogs. If you want something a bit healthier for your children, there's always the option of ordering starters or an adult main course and splitting it between your children.

THE ACTIVE FAMILY

Even in the theme park soaked central region, active families will not be disappointed with a visit to Florida. As with everywhere in the US, the option of walking between places is limited, but what Florida lacks in pavements, it makes up for with its state parks. There are over 150 in Florida and each one is open from 8am until sunset daily. And, whether inland or on the coast, all parks are wildlife havens offering an abundance of outdoor activities, including swimming, snorkelling, cycling, hiking, kayaking and canoeing. For full details of the facilities that each park offers, and to find ones in the areas you plan to visit, check the Florida State Parks' website, ***www.floridastateparks.org***.

Outside of its state parks, Florida's inland and coastal waterways are perfect for all ages to kayak and canoe. There are companies throughout the state that run kayak and canoe trips plus equipment hire. Florida's Professional Paddlesports Association's website, ***www.paddleflausa.com***, contains information on kayak and canoe tour companies and some helpful hints for those with limited paddling experience.

Cycling is increasingly popular in Florida and a network of

All-American Sport

There are many opportunities to enjoy uniquely North American sporting experiences while on holiday in Florida. Don't expect terrace songs or throngs of travelling fans, but do expect full-on, family-friendly entertainment.

American Football: Florida boasts three National Football League teams: the Miami Dolphins (Sun Life Center, Miami Gardens, ***www.miamidolphins.com***), the Tampa Bay Buccaneers – owned by Manchester United owners, the Glazer family – (Raymond James Stadium, 4201 North Dale Mabry Highway, ***www.buccaneers.com***) and the Jacksonville Panthers (Jacksonville Municipal Stadium, 1 Stadium Place, ***www.jaguars.com***). The regular season runs from September to the beginning of January, followed by playoffs culminating in the Superbowl in early February. Tickets start at around US$50. However, don't dismiss catching a university team match. Tallahassee's Florida State University Seminoles, Gainesville's University of Florida Gators and the University of Miami Hurricanes all play in huge stadiums and attract massive followings. Tickets to all-American football games are hard to get, so plan ahead.

Baseball: With relatively quick innings plus entertainment provided by mascots, cheerleaders and DJs, baseball is a brilliant family game. There are two Major League Baseball teams in Florida, the Tampa Bay Rays (Tropicana Field, One Tropicana Drive, St. Petersburg, ***http://tampabay.rays.mlb.com***) who play in the American League, and the Florida Marlins (Sunlife Stadium, 2267 NW 199th Street, Miami Gardens, ***http://florida.marlins.mlb.com***) in the National League. Matches are played from April to October, with playoffs finishing in November. Tickets cost from US$12 and are not hard to come by.

trails both large and small is laced all over the state, along with numerous cycle-hire outlets. Type 'cycling trails' into the search option of Visit Florida's website for details of the main paved and off-road cycling trails in the state (***www.visitflorida.com***).

Also see the Active Families sections of each chapter for further information.

INSIDER TIP

If you rent bikes remember that, by law, any child aged under 16 must wear a helmet.

GETTING CHILDREN INTERESTED IN FLORIDA

Whether your children are preschool or hitting their teens, you should have no trouble sparking

Major league teams from across North America travel to Florida for Spring training. These matches, which are held in stadiums across the state from February to the end of March, are a brilliant opportunity to see a mix of young players and established stars.

There are also a number of minor league teams around Florida, plus scores of opportunities to catch games with local university teams. Tickets to these matches cost US$7 to US$15.

Basketball: Florida claims two teams in the National Basketball Association: Orlando Magic (Amway Arena, 600 West Amelia Street, ***www.nba.com/magic***) and Miami Heat (American Airlines Arena, Biscayne Boulevard, ***www.nba.com/heat***). The NBA season runs from early November to the end of April and seats range from US$50 for the 'gods' to over US$300 for courtside tickets.

Ice Hockey: Florida is home to two National Hockey League teams: the Florida Panthers (Bank Atlantic Center, 1 Panther Parkway, Sunrise, ***http://panthers.nhl.com***) and Tampa Bay Lightning (St. Pete Times Forum, 401 Channelside Drive, Tampa, ***http://lightning.nhl.com***). The regular season runs from early October through to April, followed by the Stanley Cup playoffs, which usually end in June and match tickets cost US$10 to US$255. At a lower echelon, you can watch the Florida Everblades (Germain Arena, 11000 Everblades Parkway, Estero, ***www.floridaeverblades.com***). Tickets to games at this level range from US$12 to US$34.

Check with local visitor information centres for details of how to get tickets for each sport, or see ***www.sportstraveller.net*** for advance tickets and planning sports-related travel packages.

their interest in a trip to Florida. Most will be excited about visiting the theme parks, so get them involved at an early stage in finding out about the rides, attractions and animals at each, so they know what they want to do when they arrive.

The Internet has many brilliant resources to get children interested in the places you plan to visit. Google Earth is a free downloadable program with which you can obtain aerial views of just about anywhere in the world (yes, you can check how far the beach is from your hotel), watch video diaries made by residents and see photos taken in the area. Webcams are good to get up close to locations in Florida and are a smart way for children to get involved in planning the trip.

In addition, America's national parks, which in Florida

include the Everglades, operate a Junior Ranger's programme through which children are given a number of activities to undertake in their parks before being enrolled as a Junior Ranger. Copies of the activity booklets can be downloaded from the National Parks' website, ***www.nps.gov***, in advance of a visit.

For a child-friendly history of Florida that includes information on the Seminole Indians, check the 'kids' section of the My Florida website, ***http://dhr.dos.state.fl.us/kids/***, which has been created by the state's Cultural and Historical Programs. Very young children may be interested in the 'kids' section of the US Geological Survey's South Florida Information Access (Sofia) , ***http://sofia.usgs.gov/virtual_tour/kids/***, which features information on the animals and ecosystems of southern Florida.

Films are another good way to get children interested in Florida. A visit to the Kennedy Space Center is far more interesting after watching *Apollo 13*, for example, and with a history rich with the likes of Blackbeard and Gasparilla, any pirate film should raise children's interest in the state. Or you can prepare teens for the sights of Miami with the new film and old cop show, *Miami Vice*.

The older book-loving child can delve into the works of Ernest Hemingway prior to a visit to Key West, while young children can relish the Disney classics before hitting their theme parks.

FAST FACTS: FLORIDA

Alcohol The minimum age for buying and drinking alcohol in Florida is 21 and proof of age is often requested, so carry photo ID stating your date of birth. No one is allowed to consume alcohol in public places such as beaches, parks, on the street or at a motel pool unless there's an adjoining bar. It's illegal to drive with alcohol within reach of the driver, so travel with it in the boot of your car – even there it must be sealed.

Business Hours Shopping malls are generally open 10am to 9pm Monday to Saturday and many large shopping complexes and department stores also open on Sundays from noon to 6pm. Smaller, privately owned stores typically open between 9am and 10am and close between 5pm and 6pm Monday to Saturday, while large supermarkets are often open 24 hours.

Most banks are open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and some open on Saturday mornings.

Car Hire See p. 31.

Chemists Most large communities and shopping malls contain a branch of the chain chemists Walgreens; some open 24 hours and many are drive thru. Large

supermarkets such as Publix often have a chemist section.

Climate See p. 20.

Crime & Safety See p. 22.

Currency Currency can be exchanged at most major airports, banks, at private exchange offices such as American Express or Thomas Cook and at some hotels. Foreign currency exchange offices at international airports are usually open until the last international flight comes in, Monday to Saturday.

Dentists All towns and cities will have dentists. Ask at your hotel reception for advice or look in the Yellow Pages. You're unlikely to find a dentist who'll charge your travel insurance company, so expect to pay upfront and make a claim when you return home – keep all receipts and proof of all expenses incurred.

Doctors See p. 24.

Driving Rules See earlier section on p. 31.

Electricity The US uses 110 to 120 volts and 60 cycles is standard. If your small appliances use 220 to 240 volts, you'll need to bring a voltage converter and a plug adapter with two flat parallel pins.

Embassies & Consulates The main website for the British Embassy in the US is *http://ukinusa.fco.gov.uk/en*. The main Florida consulates are:

British Consulate, Orlando Main Switchboard *407 254 3300, http://ukinusa.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/other-locations/orlando/*.

British Consulate, Miami Main Switchboard *305 374 3500, http://ukinusa.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/other-locations/miami/*.

Emergencies To reach the police, ambulance or fire brigade in an emergency *911* from any phone. For less urgent requests, call the local non-emergency number for the local police, which your hotel, visitor information or telephone book will be able to provide.

Holidays Banks, government offices and post offices are all closed on the national public holidays listed below. In addition, some attractions and many stores, restaurants and museums may be closed or have limited hours (call ahead to check).

New Year's Day – 1st January

Martin Luther King Jr Day – 3rd Monday in January

Presidents' Day – 3rd Monday in February

Memorial Day – last Monday in May

Independence Day – 4th July

Labor Day – 1st Monday in September

Columbus Day – 2nd Monday in October

Veterans' Day – 11th November

Thanksgiving Day – 4th Thursday in November

Christmas Day – 25th December

Hospitals Most towns and cities have their own hospitals with emergency departments. Ask your hotel reception for advice or look in the telephone book.

Internet Access See p. 29.

Laundry Nearly all motels and some hotels and resorts will have coin-operated washing machines and dryers for guest use. Otherwise you'll have to pay for their laundry service.

Legal Aid Contact the British Embassy or consulate. See p. 45.

Lost Property Most attractions and public buildings will have a lost property department; find guest services or visitor information and they'll be able to help you. Outside of the attractions, call the local police to see if your property has been handed in.

Mail US post offices are normally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 9am to noon Saturday and blue mailboxes are easily identified on street corners. Many hotel receptions will also sell stamps and sort out postage for you.

Maps An up-to-date road map is essential for anyone hiring a car in Florida. Maps can be bought in advance from Stanfords (***www.stanfords.co.uk***). Most major bookshops with a travel department have a map section. Maps are available at petrol stations, supermarkets and visitor information centres in Florida and online maps can be printed from ***www.maps.google.com***.

Money & Credit Cards For lost or stolen credit cards call:

American Express *800 528 4800*

Diners' Club *800 234 6377*

Discover *800 347 2683*

MasterCard *800 826 2181* or *800 307 7309*

Visa *800 336 8472*

For lost or stolen travellers' cheques call:

American Express *800 221 7282*

MasterCard *800 223 9920*

Thomas Cook *800 223 7373*

Visa *800 227 6811*

Newspapers & Magazines The main national US newspaper is *USA Today*, a copy of which is complimentary in most hotels and motels. Regional papers include the *Miami Herald* and *Orlando Sentinel*, which are available in coin-operated machines.

Police In an emergency call *911*. For theft, file a report at the local police station.

Post Offices See Mail p. 46.

Safety See p. 22.

Smoking Smoking is not permitted on public transport, including taxis, or in public buildings. Nor can you smoke anywhere that serves food, although many restaurants will have an outside smoking area. Hotel rooms are either 'smoking' or 'non-smoking', so make sure you ask for a smoking room when making a reservation. At the theme parks smoking is only allowed in designated areas.

Taxes A sales tax of up to 6% is added on to everything you buy in Florida. Hotels will also often add a resort tax onto your bill, see p. 39.

Taxis It is not the norm to hail cabs in Florida. Ask your hotel reception for a recommended taxi company or look in Yellow Pages. Larger hotels sometimes have taxis waiting outside, which the bell hops call over for you. Not all taxis are metered and any non-metered taxi will charge a flat fee. Make sure you determine what the fare will be before leaving. In addition many hotels will provide a sedan service when you ask for a taxi; these are typically more expensive so be firm about what you want. As with non-metered taxis, a sedan service will charge a flat fee so make sure you agree this in advance.

Telephones The majority of accommodation options will have at least one telephone in their rooms. All local calls are free and area codes *800, 888, 866* and *877* are all freephone numbers; however, some hotels will charge to call these numbers from your room (check when making a reservation).

Coin-operated public telephones are widely available and calls cost a minimum of 50¢. Phones accept 25¢, 10¢ and 5¢ coins and a voice message will let you know when you need to put in more money.

For reversed charge or collect calls, dial 0 followed by the number and let the operator know that you're calling collect. If you need to make an international reverse charge call, ask the operator for the overseas operator. And for directory assistance within the US dial *411*.

Telephone Cards Prepaid phone cards can be bought in US$5, US$10 and US$20 denominations at most convenience stores and in shops such as Walgreens. Each card has a phone and PIN on the back. Call the number, enter the PIN when asked then dial the number you want.

Time Zones Florida has two zones. The Florida peninsula operates under Eastern Standard Time – 5 hours behind BST – and west of the Apalachicola River in the Panhandle, the state operates under Central Standard Time, which is 6 hours behind BST.

Tipping Tipping is an important part of American culture and it's standard to leave a 15 to 20% tip at a bar or restaurant. Some will include a gratuity as part of your total bill, so make

sure you don't pay twice. In hotels the norm is a US$1 to US$2 tip for each item of luggage carried up to your room, US$2 for the valet who delivers your car and US$1 to US$2 for housekeeping for each night of your stay. Many also tip the guide or driver of sightseeing tours if they have been informative and/or helpful.

Toilets & Baby-Changing Facilities Just about every attraction, public building, restaurant and shopping mall will have public toilets (restrooms) with baby-changing facilities.

Water Florida's tap water is safe to drink although many prefer bottled water, which is readily available and inexpensive in large supermarkets.

Weather For up-to-date weather information, watch the Weather Channel on cable TV or check *www.weather.com*. For more information on hurricanes, see p. 22.

3 The Major Attractions

MAJOR ATTRACTIONS

Every year millions of families flock to Florida to experience its world-famous theme parks and indulge in all the escapist entertainment that these major attractions promise. At the centre of the state, and at the top of many lists of 'must sees', is the enormous Walt Disney World, a complex the size of a small city containing four very different theme parks – Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios (formerly MGM Studios) and Animal Kingdom – where, if you believe Disney, dreams can come true. Also dominating central Florida is Universal Orlando, which, although much smaller than Walt Disney World, is equally as popular with families. Its two large theme parks – Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure – transport young and old alike deep into the realms of make-believe and the movies, including immersing visitors into the newest attraction in

town – the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. Two marine parks – SeaWorld and Discovery Cove – make up central Florida's other major attractions. Both showcase, and offer visitors the opportunity to get up close to, some of the world's best-loved marine animals. Over on the southwest coast, Tampa's Busch Gardens is the place to view a huge variety of native and exotic wildlife, while also experiencing some of Florida's best, big thrill rides. While on the east coast, the Kennedy Space Center, with its feet firmly planted in the real world of space exploration, is the odd one out of the major attractions, but no less exciting than those based on fantasy.

One visit is never enough to do or see everything all of these large attractions have to offer. And because they are continuously adding new rides, new shows and even whole new theme parks, many families return to these high-profile attractions year after year. Also, while some have a more general appeal to certain age groups, all of Florida's major attractions cater in some way for children of all ages, not to mention the child in all of us.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

For details of the main tourist offices in central Florida, see p. 14. Each of the theme parks hosts its own Guest Services Desk, where staff can help with specific enquiries.

INSIDER TIP

For useful unofficial information on Walt Disney World, see ***www.allearsnet.com***.

Orientation

I-4 runs through Orlando and central Florida and is a useful landmark from which to locate the major attractions. Walt Disney World is southwest of Orlando and west of I-4 from exits 64 to 68. Universal is north of Walt Disney World and west of I-4 at exit 75A. Halfway between the two, SeaWorld and Discovery Cove are east of I-4 at exit 72 if you're driving from Orlando, and exit 71 if you're coming from Tampa.

To reach Busch Gardens on the outskirts of Tampa from Orlando, travel west on I-4 until the junction with I-75. Take I-75 north to exit 265 onto Fowler Avenue (also signposted to the University of South Florida). Bear left onto Fowler Avenue and then turn left onto McKinley Drive. Drive south until the left-hand turn into Busch Gardens' car park.

For the Kennedy Space Center, drive east from Orlando along SR-528 (the Bee Line Expressway) to the junction with SR-407. Exit onto SR-407 and travel north until it ends. Turn east onto SR-405, which leads directly to the Space Center.

INSIDER TIP

Rush hour on the I-4 is from 7 to 9am and 4 to 6pm. If you're travelling to and from the parks at these times, avoid this road.

Arriving

Information on Disney and Universal holiday packages for UK travellers can be found on their UK websites: ***http://home.disney.co.uk*** and ***www.universalorlando.co.uk***. Both companies send out free holiday-planning DVDs on request through these sites. For more general information on package tour operators and flights to Florida see p. 29.

INSIDER TIP

Virgin Holidays is the only UK package tour operator to have check-in facilities at Walt Disney World, allowing you an extra day in their theme parks and no long waits at the airport. They also hold twice weekly receptions in Downtown Disney (see p. 65).

Getting Around

The most convenient way to reach the major parks is by car (for details on car hire, see p. 31), but there are options, all be it limited, to getting around without driving and big savings to be made by not hiring a car (for details on the pros and cons of hiring car see p. 30). Many hotels in the Orlando area offer free shuttle buses to Walt Disney World, Universal and SeaWorld (there's a free shuttle between SeaWorld and Discovery Cove). While Mears Transportation (***www.mearstransportation.com***) operate a daily round trip express bus service to Busch Gardens from a large number of locations in central Florida. Check either the 'plan your trip' section of Busch Gardens' website (see p. 78), or the Mears Transportation website (above) for details or call *1 800 221 1339*.

Some hotels offer complimentary transport on this shuttle service, which is also free with an Orlando FlexTicket (see p. 68). Otherwise tickets cost US$10 per person.

Mears Transportation also operates a shuttle service to the Kennedy Space Center on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tickets are US$34 per person *407 423 5566* for 24-hour reservations.

For details of Orlando's bus service, see p. 94 and for the I-Ride Trolley, a frequent tourist trolley service that covers International Drive, see p. 101.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Children's Top 10 Attractions

❶ **Disney's Hollywood Studios'** stunning, visually spectacular, end-of-night extravaganza, Fantasmic! See p. 62.

❷ **Getting up close** to the animals on Animal Kingdom's Kilimanjaro Safari; p. 64.

When to Visit

During peak periods, tens of thousands flock to Florida's theme parks every day. Disney alone estimates 200,000 visitors at these times, which are: Christmas and New Year, the 2 weeks of Easter, Thanksgiving weekend (4th Thursday in November), Martin Luther King Jr holiday weekend (3rd Monday in January), college spring break (see p. 21) and the summer months. In between these dates the parks are somewhat quieter, with the periods from the end of Easter until early June and September being the best times to visit.

3 **SheiKra** at Busch Gardens, a monster, floorless, heart-thumping roller coaster; p. 79.

4 **Standing in the shadow** of Saturn V at the Kennedy Space Center; p. 80.

5 **Seuss Landing** at Universal's Islands of Adventure, laugh out loud fun for pre-school-age children; p. 72.

6 **Shamu's (the killer whale)** dazzling performances at SeaWorld; p. 74.

7 **Universal Studios'** speedy and scary Revenge of the Mummy ride; p. 83.

8 **Lunch** at Disney's Hollywood Studios' quirky Sci-Fi Dine-In Theater themed restaurant; p. 83.

9 **Battling against evil** in Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin, Magic Kingdom's colourful ride through video game: p. 57.

10 **Epcot's** The Seas with Nemo and Friends, a brilliant adventure ride for small children; p. 59.

Child-Friendly Festivals & Events

Mardi Gras at Universal Studios ★★

www.universalorlando.com/mardigras.

Top entertainers from New Orleans' famous Mardi Gras recreate their spectacular parades and concerts at Universal Studios each March. The dates vary each year (check the website for information) and entrance to all Mardi Gras events is included in Universal's admission price.

INSIDER TIP

Always buy your theme park tickets in advance. It's far cheaper than buying them on the day at the park gates.

Epcot International Flower & Garden Festival ★★

From April to early June, Epcot transforms itself with a stunning themed festival of fantastic floral displays and sculptures. A programme of supporting events includes 'Flower Power' concerts and parties featuring Disney favourites, all for the normal admission price.

Walt Disney World Marathon Weekend ★

http://disneyworldsports.disney.go.com.

Every January, Disney hosts a fun-filled weekend of races and runs through its iconic theme parks, including a marathon, half marathon and a Family Fun Run. The weekend also includes a Kids' Fest – a programme of races for all ages including a Diaper Dash for toddlers. Disney medals await all competitors and to take part, register online in advance via the events section of Disney's Wide World of Sports website (above).

Universals' Halloween Horror Nights ★★

http://halloweenhorrornights.com/orlando/.

Pitched at the over 14s, Universal's annual celebration of Halloween brings classic horror movies to life. Expect haunted houses, scary live events and monsters of every kind.

Mickey's Not So Scary Halloween Party

Aimed at younger children, Disney's Halloween celebrations are family friendly and a relatively tame affair. The party stretches over a number of nights, after the park officially closes, throughout September and October and sees Magic Kingdom transformed by themed decorations, fireworks and parades. Tickets are cheaper if you buy in advance and vary depending on the night, with 31st October being the most expensive.

Most parks also host special events at Christmas and New Year. All of Walt Disney World's attractions and resorts are decorated throughout December and there's a multitude of seasonal events to choose from.

INSIDER TIP

Most parks offer photograph packages – have your picture taken around the park by professional photographers and pick up the ones you like when you leave. They're not cheap, but it's worth splashing out for that special picture if you don't want to carry a camera around.

The Big Theme Parks

Walt Disney World

407 824 4321, www.disneyworld.com.

'I only hope that we don't lose sight of one thing – that it was all started by a mouse', Walt Disney.

When it comes to theme parks, no one can match the

Spaceship Earth, Epcot © Disney

panache, attention to detail and magic touch of Walt Disney World, which originally consisted of the Magic Kingdom and two hotels when it opened in 1971. Since then, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios and Animal Kingdom have joined the list of major attractions along with another 21 resorts, two water parks, an entertainment strip and huge sporting venue – and Disney just keeps on growing. Everything about Disney is overwhelming, from orientating yourself within its 47 square miles to working out which ticket deal to go for. Walt Disney World is one of the most expensive attractions in Florida, so take time to research ticket deals (see box, p. 94) and find out exactly what each member of your family wants to experience at the four very different parks before you get there.

INSIDER TIP

To save money take your own bottled water into the theme parks and refill from the numerous onsite drinking fountains.

Magic Kingdom ★ AGE 15 & UNDER

This granddaddy of theme parks' iconic status makes Magic Kingdom a Florida must see. Despite it being a bit dated around the edges, and having little to please thrill-seeking teens for whom the fab five (Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Pluto and Goofy) aren't as cool as they used to be, Magic Kingdom still attracts around 17 million visitors a year, making it America's most popular theme park. No one can claim to have done Disney without experiencing Magic Kingdom's most famous rides and the park is easily reached via a short monorail journey from Disney's Ticket and Transportation Center. On entering it's impossible not to get caught up in young children's tangible excitement as many dress up as princesses or their favourite Disney character just for the occasion. And with its infectious fun-filled atmosphere, abundance of all things shaped like mouse ears and wacky street performers, this is the ideal starting point for Florida's main attractions if you're visiting with small children.

On arrival, visitors stream through Main Street USA, a bustling thoroughfare styled around early 20th-century small-town America and packed with themed shops and eating options.

INSIDER TIP

VMK (Virtual Magic Kingdom) Central on Main Street USA is a good place to head if it's raining. Here you can play games and answer trivia questions about the park online.

Main Street USA leads to the fairytale Cinderella's Castle at the heart of the park, around which six other lands fan out. There are over 40 attractions to experience, with different age groups getting more out of some areas than others; however, all

The Theme Parks – A Family Survival Guide

The sheer size and scale of Florida's major attractions takes British families some getting used to. Visits involve long days starting with a sugar-rush of excitement and ending in a crash of exhaustion, with plenty of walking and queuing, often in high temperatures, in between. Here's some practical advice to help you stay sane:

- Don't promise your children that you can see everything in one day. Pick what's important, do that first, and then see what else you've time for.
- Most young children flag around 3 to 4pm, when the parks are at their hottest and busiest. If you can, take a break for a couple of hours and come back later.
- Don't overestimate your family's staying power. To avoid burnout, alternate between a day at a theme park and a day relaxing by the pool or going shopping.
- Organise a place to meet in case you get separated and make sure young children have identification details with them.
- Take a plastic bag to put your camera in, as some seating areas for the shows in the marine parks, and all water rides, will drench you.
- Make a note of where you park. Theme park car parks are enormous. Take a sunshade for the windscreen.
- Wear sunscreen and comfortable shoes and drink lots of fluids.
- Don't put your children on rides if they are upset.
- Bring a change of clothes for children who won't like wearing wet clothes after the water rides or playing in the splash areas.

have a more general appeal to young children.

Of the rides that are aimed at all age groups, don't miss **Pirates of the Caribbean** ★★ complete with Captain Jack Sparrow in Adventureland; the runaway **Big Thunder Mountain Railroad** ★★ in Frontierland and the twilight world of the **Haunted Mansion** in Liberty Square.

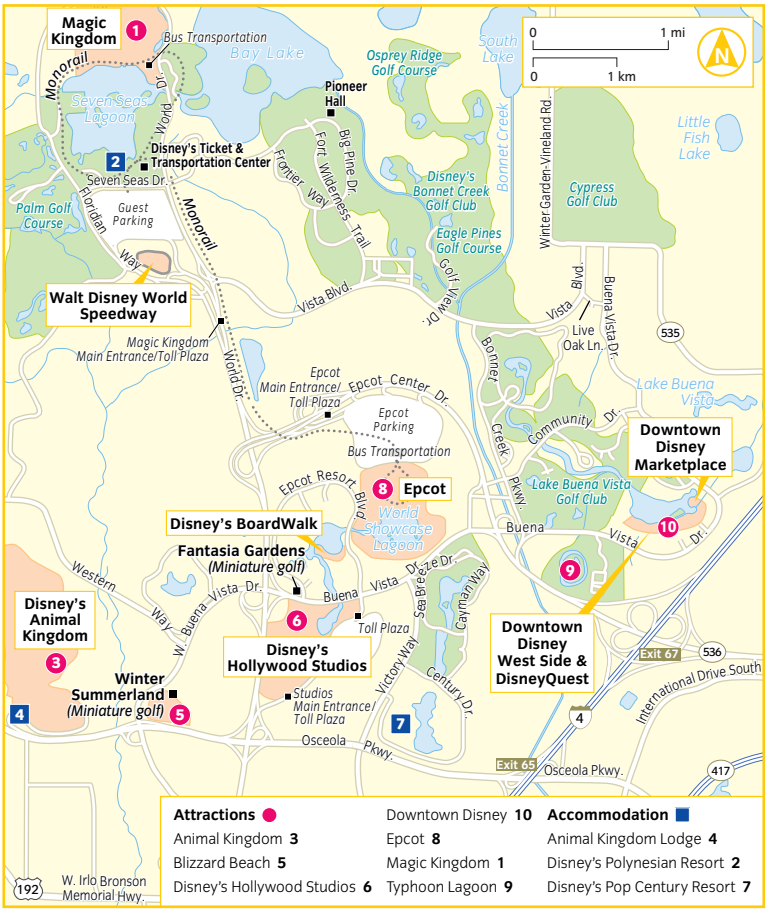
Highlights for pre-school- age children include the magical **Peter Pan's Flight** and **The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh** both in Fantasyland and the cutest land of them all, **Mickey's Toontown Fair,** an interactive play area and favourite

FUN FACT

Cinderella's Castle

Cinderella's Castle is 189 feet tall, however, due to forced perspective, it appears larger than it is.

WALT DISNEY WORLD



haunt of Disney characters. However, those without small children should steer clear of this land in busy times when the number of buggies and children make it impossible to navigate.

A big favourite with the under 8s is **Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin** ★★ in Tomorrowland which transports riders deep into battle with the evil emperor Zurg. Also in Tomorrowland, older children gravitate towards the recently revamped **Space Mountain** ★, a thrilling roller-coaster ride to the stars in pitch black. Another not to be missed ride for older children is Magic Kingdom's vertiginous flume ride **Splash Mountain** ★ in Frontierland (you'll get very wet).

This venerable park also includes a couple of standout shows: **Mickey's Philhar-Magic** ★★, a fun-filled 3-D

Height Restrictions at Magic Kingdom

Escape – 40 inches
Goofy's Barnstormer – 35 inches
Space Mountain – 44 inches
Splash Mountain, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and Stitch's Great Tomorrowland Indy Speedway – 52 inches

movie in Fantasyland, and the interactive **Monsters Inc. Laugh Floor** ★ in Tomorrowland, which incorporates jokes texted from the audience into the action. And every afternoon Magic Kingdom's **Disney Dreams Come True** parade winds its colourful way through Frontierland, past Cinderella's Castle and up Main Street USA. This spectacle is aimed at, and loved by, the under 8s, and if you're not interested, don't get caught in Frontierland while it's on. This is a good time to snatch a go on the most popular rides, as the queues are shorter.

While Magic Kingdom doesn't always have an end of day show, when it does, it is excellent. Check the website, or the daily schedule to see if **Spectro-Magic** ★★, a dazzling illuminated parade, or **Wishes** ★★★, a stunning fireworks and pyrotechnic spectacular narrated by Jimmy Cricket, is being shown when you are there and make sure you see them!

Epcot ★★ ALL AGES

Epcot – an acronym for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow – is the most spacious of Disney's parks and is split into two distinct sections: the World Showcase is a circle of striking pavilions from 11 nations settled around a lagoon (open around 11am); and Future World is a collection of attractions and rides around Epcot's famous giant white geocentric dome. This is the largest of Disney's theme parks, so allow a day and a half to see everything.

Epcot appeals to older children – families with pre-school-age children might struggle to keep their youngsters entertained. To address this, Disney has introduced Kidcot stations around the park, with activities to keep youngsters amused. Visit the Kidcots around the World Showcase, where children are given blank masks and invited to decorate them with artefacts collected from each country's

FUN FACT **Walt's Vision**

For a fascinating insight into Walt Disney's original dream for Epcot, see ***www.waltopia.com***.

FUN FACT **The Earffel Tower**

Keep your eyes open for Disney's Hollywood Studios' distinctive water tower – known as 'The Earffel Tower' because it supports a pair of 5,000-pound giant mouse ears.

pavilion, providing an incentive to visit them all. Some pavilions have rides and films with a family focus, of which the **El Rio del Tiempo** ★, a boat ride through time in the Mexico Pavilion, is the most entertaining.

INSIDER TIP

Most people ride Spaceship Earth – a ride through the past, present and future of the earth – as soon as they enter Epcot, so leave this ride until later in the day when the wait times are often shorter.

The World Showcase is an excellent place to eat and shop. Each pavilion sells crafts, clothes and food native to the country it represents – don't miss the superb food market in Japan. If your children are missing their favourite chocolate, visit the shop in the United Kingdom Pavilion, which sells English confectionery, biscuits and, naturally, tea.

Although the futuristic theme of Future World hasn't stood the test of time and its attractions are more educational than adrenaline-fuelled, children get more out of this section of Epcot. It is a great place for families to enjoy together, so allow plenty of time to experience everything. Favourites here include the interactive **ImageWorks** ★, where children learn about photography and send their friends virtual postcards, and **Innovations** ★★, an excellent learning environment in which you crawl through bug tunnels, build molecules and operate industrial robots. Young children should not miss the **Seas with Nemo and Friends** ★★ ride; climb aboard a 'clamobile' on an underwater search for Nemo. If your children are looking for thrills, head for the high-speed, race track simulator **Test Track, Mission: Space,** an inter-galactic adventure, and **Soarin',** a simulated flight over California.

Some days at Epcot end with **IllumiNations** ★★, a stunning 30-minute firework, fountain and laser light display at the World Showcase lagoon. Not to be missed if your children aren't

Height Restrictions in Epcot

Mission: Space – 44 inches

Test Track, Body Wars and Soarin' – 40 inches

Essential Walt Disney World Information

What Things Cost

Tickets: Disney's ticketing structure is organised to allow you to customise your visit. It starts with a **Magic Your Way Base Ticket,** which gives individual entry to one park a day (either Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios or Animal Kingdom) for up to 10 days in a 14-day period. The most expensive tickets are: 1 day US$79, US$68 children aged 3 to 9, under 3s free, and get cheaper per day the more days you buy, ending at 10 days costing US$243 adults, US$210 children.

For an additional fee, you can buy **'No Expiration'** tickets, which means there's no time limit to when you can use your days. These tickets range from US$174 adult, US$151 children for 2 days to US$452 adult, US$419 children for 10 days. Other 'add-ons' are a **'Park Hopper'** option for US$52, which allows you to move around between parks on each of your days. This is worth buying if you qualify for **Extra Magic Hours** (see p. 60). Finally, the **'Water Park Fun & More'** option for US$50 includes entry to Disney's other attractions, including Typhoon Lagoon (see p. 100) and Blizzard Beach (see p. 99).

Parking: US$14 per day (free if you are staying in a Disney hotel).
Buggy rental: single US$15, double US$25.
Wheelchair rental: US$12.
Lockers: US$7 to US$15 depending on size.

Disney accepts all major credit cards.

Getting Around All Disney parks, resorts and attractions are connected by free shuttle buses and some by monorail and ferry, so if you're staying at a Disney-owned hotel you can easily move around between all the attractions.

If you're not staying at Disney and arrive via the free shuttle service provided by your accommodation, you'll be dropped off at the **Ticket and Transportation Center** near Magic Kingdom (see the map on p. 57), which is also where you'll find bus stops for the public transportation system (for details of central Florida's bus service, known as Lynx buses, see p. 94). Use Disney transport from here to get to the theme parks, but allow plenty of time for the return journey to the Ticket and Transportation Center (on average buses depart every 20 minutes), as buses can be frustratingly slow if there's a lot of traffic.

If you're driving to Disney as a day visitor, park at any of the theme parks and use Disney transport to get around.

Opening Times All four Disney theme parks open at 9am, but their closing times vary between 6pm and midnight. Guests at Disney resorts can take advantage of the **Extra Magic Hours**

programme that allows an extra hour before opening time and up to 3 hours after closing time in one of the theme or water parks each day at no extra cost.

Details of the opening and closing times of all Disney's theme and water parks and the Extra Magic Hours schedule for up to 6 months in advance can be found on Disney's website.

Park Maps & Schedules Disney print a **'Times and Information'** leaflet that contains details of all the parks' operating hours and parade, show and fireworks times over a 2-week period. Specific park maps and daily schedules can be picked up at the entrances.

Fast Pass This free service eases wait times at the most popular attractions. All you have to do is insert your entry ticket into the Fast Pass ticket slot of any ride that offers this service and you'll be allocated a time when you can return to this attraction and go to the front of the queue. Return times vary depending on how busy the park is and rides can run out of time slots on very busy days. You can only have one Fast Pass for one attraction at any one time.

Families with Little Ones All Disney parks have themed play areas, changing facilities in the toilets and baby-care centres to warm bottles, feed, change nappies and buy baby supplies, all of which are clearly indicated on the park maps, which you'll pick up on arrival.

Most attractions offer a **Rider Switch** service, where one parent waits with the children while the other rides and then you switch roles. Pick up an **'Every Little Detail'** leaflet (available at all of the parks). It's filled with advice on how to get the most out of your visit to Disney if you have pre-school-age children.

Eating at Disney Walt Disney World has around 400 dining options. Many families prefer fast food to sit-down dining and most outlets have a 'kids picks' selection for children aged under 10. Disney does attempt to provide healthy options and each theme park contains stalls selling fruit. If you're looking for something special, each park also has fantastic themed restaurants – for highlights see Family-Friendly Dining on p. 82. Book these restaurants in advance during busy periods (for all dining reservations *407 939 3463*). If you don't book in advance, the information centres at the parks have details of availability and can make reservations. Children can dine with their favourite Disney character; call the number above.

Visitors with Special Needs Pick up a Guidebook for Guests with Disabilities from Guest Services at any of the Disney parks or *407 824 4321.* Further information can also be found on Walt Disney World's website (see p. 54).

Additional Amenities Currency exchange. ATMs.

too tired – check the park's schedule for days and times.

Disney's Hollywood Studios ★★ ALL AGES

It'll take a day to explore this 1950s-style park, the smallest of Disney's theme parks, which celebrates the golden age of Hollywood, or, as Disney's chairman described it, 'the Hollywood that never was and always will be'. Most age groups enjoy the movies and there's something to appeal to everyone here. Look out for the impromptu outdoor entertainment, provided by the likes of Power Rangers, The Incredibles and phoney movie producers, which make this one of the most enjoyable parks to wander around.

After arriving in the park through the Art Deco entrance, stroll down Hollywood Boulevard towards the enormous model of Mickey's Sorcerer's Hat from *Fantasia* at the centre of the park. The Hollywood Studios' themed areas, all named with films in mind, circle around this hat, while behind it sits a full-scale replica of Hollywood's famous Chinese Theater – home to the **Great Movie Ride** ★. This is a must for film fans of school age and above (little ones might be scared by the *Aliens*). While queuing, you file past glass cases filled with film memorabilia, including a carousel horse from *Mary Poppins* and the ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*.

In this area you'll also find one of this park's newest, most interactive attractions, **The American Idol Experience** – an audience participation show where you get to vote which plucky performer makes it through to the next round. **Toy Story Mania!** ★★ on Pixar Place, another snazzy new attraction and firm favourite with all ages, transports riders in glorious 3-D through a raft of fairground-style games.

Hollywood Studios is a working production studio and a visit also involves discovering the back-stage world of film, via attractions like the **Studio Backlot Tour** and the **Magic of Disney Animation.** Shows are also an important feature of this park and the **Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!** ★, **Beauty and the Beast** musical and **Voyage of the Little Mermaid** ★ shows are fantastically popular. Plan your day around their start times detailed in the park schedule, which you'll pick up along with a map on arrival.

Families with small children should be wary of the **Muppet Vision 3-D** film as the loud noises at the end might upset tots, but allow time for the enormous playground at **Honey I Shrunk the Kids Movie Set Adventure** ★. Older children will love some of Disney's best rides for teenagers, including **Star Tours** ★ a flight-simulation ride based on the original *Star Wars* film, and the **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster** ★, an indoor high-speed roller coaster featuring the music of Aerosmith. Scariest of all is the legendary **Twilight Zone Tower of**

Height Restrictions at Disney's Hollywood Studios

Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith – 48 inches

Star Tours and the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror – 40 inches

Terror ★★★, a ride that is never the same twice but always truly terrifying – if you don't believe me, just listen to the screams.

Those wanting to discover more about Walt Disney himself should make time for the multi-media **Walt Disney: One Man's Dream** – an attraction come exhibition fit to burst with memorabilia from Walt's life. While at the entrance to Hollywood Studios is my favourite theme park shop – Sid Cahuenga's One of a Kind. A must for the serious (and rich) film fan, here you can buy a range of original movie memorabilia such as a signed photograph of Liz Taylor for US$1,400 or the stripy jacket worn by Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins* for a cool US$65,000.

The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror™, © Disney

The Twilight Zone™ is a registered trademark of CBS, Inc. and is used pursuant to a licence from CBS, Inc.

Everyday the colourful **Block Party Bash** parade winds its way through the park and some days at Hollywood Studios end with **Fantasmic!** ★★★, a 25-minute show based on the much-loved Disney classic *Fantasia*. This features around 50 performers in a water, laser and fireworks extravaganza. It has nearly 7,000 seats and 3,000 standing room places that fill up every night, so arrive early to get a place.

INSIDER TIP

The Fantasmic! dinner package is available at either the Hollywood Brown Derby, Mama Melrose's Ristorante Italiano or the Hollywood and Vine restaurants and includes dinner and seat reservations at Fantasmic! (adults US$25; children US$12). Book in advance via the dining reservation number on p. 61.

Animal Kingdom ★★★

ALL AGES

With its abundance of shade and lack of high-octane rides, Animal Kingdom is unlike any other major attraction. The sheer

number of animals in this park (around 1,700) makes Animal Kingdom an instant hit with all children, and it's worth arriving early to beat the crowds and to view the animals before it gets too hot and they get less active.

The park's entrance leads to Oasis, one of six lands surrounding Discovery Island and the Tree of Life. With around 300 animals carved into its massive trunk, the Tree of Life forms Animal Kingdom's focal point and is one of its most fascinating creations for children.

Popular with most visitors, the **Kilimanjaro Safari** ★★ is an open-air jeep ride through a large savannah, where you'll spy roaming elephants, giraffes, lions, rhinos and gazelles. If you don't arrive early for this ride, expect a long wait. However, you can take as much time as you like watching the different species on Animal Kingdom's walking tours. My favourite is the Maharajah Jungle Trek, a walk through the recreated ruins of an ancient palace where you'll encounter tigers, tapirs, Komodo dragons and surprisingly adorable giant fruit bats. Pick up a brochure at the start of this walk to find out more about the animals and the best places to see them.

Tree of Life® attraction, © Disney

Parents of young children should pick up *Kid's Discovery Club Guide,* a small booklet of activities for children to complete as they go around the park. There's plenty to keep toddlers entertained in DinoLand USA, with dinosaur-themed carnival games and a crazy maze made of prehistoric bones. Children also enjoy the Conservation Station and Affection Section in Rafiki's Planet Watch, where they can interact with farmyard animals and learn about their care.

FUN FACT Ancient Legends & Hidden Mickeys

Although the murals decorating the Maharajah Jungle Trek's crumbling palace represent ancient legends, look closely and you'll see that the hunter in the turban is wearing a Mickey Mouse earring. This is one of the dozens of 'Hidden Mickeys' dotted around Walt Disney World. See ***www.hiddenmickeys.org*** for more information and clues on the locations of many more.

Height Restrictions at Animal Kingdom

Expedition Everest – 44 inches
Dinosaur – 40 inches
Kali River Rapids – 38 inches
Primeval Whirl – 48 inches

Older children should head to the **Primeval Whirl** ★ coaster and **Dinosaur** ★ ride in DinoLand USA, while next door in Asia is Animal Kingdom's knock-out thrill ride. **Expedition Everest – Legend of the Forbidden Mountain** ★★★ is a perilous high-speed train ride into the unknown. You'll also find two of Disney's best family shows here: the hugely popular **Festival of the Lion King** ★★ in Camp Minnie–Mickey (look out for the bird boxes with mouse-ear-shaped holes) is an explosion of colour, music and acrobatics. **Finding Nemo – The Musical** ★★ in DinoLand USA fuses puppets and performers in an underwater spectacular – check show times on the park schedule when you arrive.

Every afternoon the Jammin' Jungle Parade rocks its way from the Kilimanjaro Safari in Africa around Discovery Island and back again.

Downtown Disney

As with everything Disney, the scale and scope of its downtown entertainment, dining and shopping complex is huge. This vast area is open to all, free to enter and split into three distinct areas – Marketplace, Pleasure Island and West Side – each with its own style and age-group appeal.

Marketplace, with its LEGO Imagination Center, toy shops, interactive fountains and casual

Downtown Disney® West Side, © Disney

Cirque du Soleil

Downtown Disney's West Side is home to a giant Cirque du Soleil theatre, whose stunning **La Nouba** ★★★ show, with its acrobats, sublime performers and sheer spectacle, wows audiences of all ages. Performed Wednesday to Sunday at 6pm and 9pm, this is one of the most expensive attractions in Walt Disney World, costing US$69 to US$120 for adults and US$56 to US$97 for children, but it's also one of its most memorable. Tickets should be booked in advance *407 939 7600*.

dining, is better suited to families with small children. Older children prefer the West Side because of DisneyQuest, an enormous indoor interactive theme park (open 11:30am–11pm Sun–Thurs, until midnight Fri and Sat, US$40, US$34 children aged 3–9, who must be accompanied by someone over 16 years old, under 3s are free) where you can take a virtual jungle cruise or design your own roller coaster. The West Side also features a 24-screen cinema and a giant Planet Hollywood (booking advisable) and is the perfect destination for teenagers on a rainy day. Pleasure Island stands at the centre of Downtown Disney and is designed for adults, with numerous clubs and bars.

For details of Walt Disney World's two water parks – **Blizzard Beach** and **Typhoon Lagoon** see p. 99 & p. 100.

Universal Orlando Resort

1000 Universal Studios Plaza, Orlando, 407 363 8000 ***www.universalorlando.com***.

Universal has rapidly grown from one theme park – Universal Studios – to an entire resort complex whose size, scale and excitement easily competes with Disney. Day visitors arrive via moving walkways from the car parks into CityWalk, an entertainment complex that comes into its own at night. During the day it is a busy thoroughfare for Universal's two theme parks – Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure – which sit at either end of CityWalk, with the latter including the all new **Wizarding World of Harry Potter.** Universal's three hotels also lead off this area; the Hard Rock and Portofino Bay hotels are close to Universal Studios and the Royal Pacific Resort by Islands of Adventure. Each park deserves a whole day and although both parks have much to offer young children, the overall appeal of Universal, with its slew of action-packed rides and shows, has more appeal to older children.

Universal Studios ★★ ALL AGES

From the moment you walk past Universal's enormous, iconic spinning globe and through the massive movie studio style gates into the park, you're catapulted

UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT

into the make-believe world of the movies. The shop-lined Plaza of the Stars leads from the park's snazzy entrance to Production Central, the first of six themed areas – most of which circle around a large lake on the east side of the park.

Parents of young toddlers should head to Woody Woodpecker's Kidzone, with its two interactive playgrounds, a children's roller coaster and two children's shows performed regularly throughout the day. Also great for this age group and above is the **E.T. Adventure** ride – board your flying bicycles to help E.T. save his planet.

The rest of Universal Studios, from its disaster-movie simulator **Twister...Ride it Out,** to the futuristic thrills of **Terminator 2: 3-D** ★★ and **Men In Black: Alien Attack** ★★★, is a theme park of stunts and sci-fi

The Orlando FlexTicket

A cheap option for those wanting to visit all the non-Disney main attractions is the **Orlando FlexTicket,** which offers unlimited access over a 14-day period to five parks: Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure, SeaWorld, Aquatica (see p. 98) and Wet 'n' Wild (see p. 100) (US$265, US$240 children aged 3–9). The FlexTicket Plus adds Busch Gardens to the deal, including free transport from Orlando (US$300, US$280 children aged 3–9). FlexTickets can be bought at any of the participating attractions or online in advance at ***www.orlandoflexticket.co.uk*** – also see the Ticket Deals box on p. 94.

orientated towards older children and adults. Recent additions include **Hollywood Rip Ride Rocket** ★★ – Orlando's tallest, music thumping roller coaster – and **the Simpsons Ride** ★ where you join Homer, Marge, Bart and Lisa on a wild journey through Krustyland.

INSIDER TIP

The Simpsons Ride has replaced the Back to the Future Ride, but you can still see the famous DeLorean DMC-12 from the film opposite the Delancey Street Preview Center.

The horrifically fast **Revenge of the Mummy** ★★★, where riders are plunged into darkness to face fireballs, scarab beetles and mummies is another not to be missed high-thrill ride. And long-time favourite **Jaws,** where even though you know it's coming, that great white shark always makes you jump, is still worth queuing for. While **Shrek 4-D,** a 20-minute film presented through the miracle of 'Ogre Vision', provides welcome comic relief.

Universal's painted backlot sets and fleet of 1950s' cars aren't just for show; the park is also a working studio. This fact is reflected in the **Horror Make-Up Show,** which reveals how some on-screen special effects are created.

If you're visiting during the summer, make time to take in **Universal 360: A Cinesphere Spectacular,** this park's dazzling movie, laser and firework-filled seasonal night-time show.

INSIDER TIP

Both Universal parks offer the chance for children to meet and have their photographs taken with Shrek and Donkey, Homer Simpson and Spider-Man. Check the park maps for a schedule of where and when they'll appear.

Islands of Adventure

★★★ **ALL AGES**

The coolest theme park in Orlando for families with older children and teenagers, Islands of Adventure delivers thrilling roller coasters and exciting water rides like no other attraction in Florida. From the moment you walk through its atmospheric

The Jaws Ride, © 2007 Universal Orlando Resort. All rights reserved.

Port of Entry, clustered with shops and eateries themed after the Far East, you know this imaginative park, which boasts Steven Spielberg as one of its creative consultants, will be completely different in style and ambience to Universal Studios.

The park's themed lands form a circle from the Port of Entry, with the latest and greatest land – the Wizarding World of Harry Potter – nestled behind Jurassic Park.

This much-anticipated attraction has brought Harry Potter's magic-filled world alive in meticulous, interactive detail, and dominated by the brooding, cliff-top Hogwart's Castle, home to **Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey** – an exciting ride through the characters and stories of J. K. Rowling's books. This land's other big thrill ride is **Dragon's Challenge,** a high-speed duel roller coaster (formerly the Dueling Dragons of

Height Restrictions at Universal Studios

For all rides, children under 48 inches must be accompanied by an adult and able to sit upright on their own.

E.T. Adventure – 34 inches

Hollywood Rip Ride Rocket – 51 inches

Men In Black: Alien Attack – 42 inches

Revenge of the Mummy – 48 inches

Simpsons Ride – 40 inches

Woody Woodpecker's Nuthouse Coaster – 36 inches

Children under 40 inches must also use the stationary seats in Jimmy Neutron's Nicktoon Blast.

Essential Universal Orlando Information

What Things Cost

Tickets: There are two types of tickets to choose from: a one park 1-day ticket, which ranges from US$79, US$69 children aged 3 to 9, under 3s free to US$160 adults, US$140 children for 7 days; or a park-to-park access ticket, which allows unlimited access to both parks. These tickets range from US$109 adults, US$100 children for 1 day to US$170 adults, US$150 children for 7 days.

Parking: US$14 and US$3 between 6pm and 10pm.

Buggy rental: single US$15, double US$20.

Wheelchair rental: US$12.

Lockers: US$8 or family-size lockers US$10.

Universal accepts all major credit cards.

Getting Around Although large, the whole Universal complex can be easily explored by foot. Day visitors walk through CityWalk to reach both Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure and Universal's hotels are reached via landscaped walkways. There's a frequent free water taxi service for guests from their hotels to CityWalk.

Opening Times Universal opens at 9am and closes at between 6pm and 10pm, depending on the time of year. Details of opening hours for 6 months in advance can be found on Universal's website (see p. 66).

Park Maps & Schedules These are available at the entrance to each park.

the adjacent Lost Continent) whose riders narrowly miss each other as they hurtle around. An altogether more family-orientated roller coaster is the **Flight of the Hippogriff,** which swirls riders over the grounds of Hogwarts. Visitors can also wander through the snow-dusted Hogsmeade Village and indulge in the special effects show – **Hogwarts: An Introduction to Magic.**

There is, however, much more to Islands of Adventure than Hogwarts and any family with teenagers should aim for Marvel Super Hero Island to experience its amazing collection of adrenaline-fuelled rides. These include the outstanding **Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man 3-D** ★★★, the great green roaring **Incredible Hulk Coaster** ★★, which catapults its riders at a G-force equivalent to that of a jet fighter, and the stomach-churning **Doctor Doom's Fearfall,** which shoots riders up a 150-foot

Universal Express Plus Universal sells a limited number of Express Plus passes for each park every day. These passes are bought in addition to entry tickets and allow visitors into Express Access queues with short wait times and are valid for one use at each ride offering an express queue. Prices vary depending on the time of year and day of the week and you can buy them in advance or on the day. A 1-day ticket valid for either Universal Studios or Islands of Adventure costs US$20 to US$50 per person and a 1-day ticket valid for both parks costs US$26 to US$56. If you're staying at any of the Universal hotels, you'll receive free Express Access with your room key.

Families with Little Ones Both theme parks have baby-change facilities in all toilets as well as play areas. There are nursing facilities in the Family Services area of Universal Studios and in the first-aid area of Islands of Adventure. Universal operates a Child Swap programme, which allows parents of small children to take it in turns to ride while one of them looks after the children.

Visitors with Special Needs Universal provides a lot of assistance for visitors with disabilities. Pick up a Rider's Guide for Rider Safety & Guests with Disabilities from Guest Services at either park. Further information can also be found on Universal Orlando's website (see p. 66).

iPhone apps There are a number of iPhone apps available for Universal, including a day organiser and wait times.

Additional Amenities Currency exchange. ATMs.

tower only to plummet them back down again.

There are three excellent water rides at this park. **Jurassic Park River Adventure** ★★, which whirls its way through a recreated primeval forest complete with T-Rex and an 85-foot plunge into complete darkness, is definitely not for young ones. With merely a 75-foot drop, the wacky **Dudley Do-Right's Ripsaw Falls** flume ride is more fun than scary, while **Popeye and Bluto's Bilge-Rat Barges** river rapids ride gets every rider totally drenched.

FUN FACT

Fast Rides

Plucky riders accelerate from zero to 40 mph in a mere 2 seconds aboard the Incredible Hulk Coaster.

Height Restrictions at Islands of Adventure

Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man – 40 inches
Barges – 42 inches
Doctor Doom's Fearfall – 52 inches
Dragon's Challenge and the Incredible Hulk Coaster – 54 inches
Dudley Do-Right's Ripsaw Falls – 44 inches
The High in the Sky Seuss Trolley Train Ride – 34 inches
Jurassic Park River Adventure and Popeye and Bluto's Bilge-Rat Flying
Pteranodon Flyers – children must be between 36 inches and 56 inches
Unicorn – 36 inches
Pregnant women are also requested not to ride on 11 of Islands of Adventure's rides.

Although the focus of this fantasy-filled park isn't on small children, it provides some excellent entertainment for them. Families with toddlers should head in a clockwise direction from the Port of Entry to the colourful **Seuss Landing** ★★★, where the best-loved characters from Dr Seuss's stories come to life. Here you'll find a number of rides for small children, including the fabulous **The High in the Sky Seuss Trolley Train Ride** and **Caro-Seuss-el** merry-go-round created out of Seussian characters, and you can pick up a green eggs and ham sandwich from the Green Eggs and Ham Takeaway stand. Other attractions for youngsters include **the Pteranodon Flyers** and Camp Jurassic playground in Jurassic Park.

Jurassic Park River Adventure, Islands of Adventure, © 2007 Universal Orlando Resort. All rights reserved.

Emeril's restaurant, © 2007 Universal Orlando Resort. All rights reserved.

Islands of Adventure's main show is the swashbuckling **Eighth Voyage of Sinbad** stunt show. Good for all age groups, performances take place at regular intervals throughout the day. And any child who loves dinosaurs can learn all about these prehistoric giants via interactive displays at the Jurassic Park Discovery Center.

CityWalk

*407 363 8000, **www.citywalkorlando.com**.*

CityWalk, with its collection of themed restaurants, clubs, shops and 20-screen multiplex cinema, is Universal's equivalent of Downtown Disney and, with none of Disney's squeaky-clean image to uphold, a much trendier place for older children and teenagers to hang out. CityWalk is home to the world's largest Hard Rock Cafe, a huge NBC City restaurant, and the upmarket Emeril's for a more sophisticated (and expensive) dinner.

A great place to eat in CityWalk is the popular Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville, ***www.margaritavilleorlando.com***, a lively Key West-style restaurant with an open-air deck for families to dine during the day. However, CityWalk is a serious party place and a much more adult affair in the evening, with cover charges coming into force at many venues. You can purchase a CityWalk Party Pass (US$12 or US$15 with a movie), which allows unlimited entry into all the attractions at night (this pass is free with Universal's multi-day, multi-park ticket deals, see p. 68); some establishments only allow over 21s entry after a certain time.

The hugely entertaining, multimedia Blue Man Group (***www.blueman.com***) are regular performers at the Sharp AQUOS Theatre (accessible from CityWalk). Their wild shows combine comedy, music and theatre into one of the most

entertaining, unique and unforgettable nights out Orlando has to offer. Tickets start at US$64, US$25 children aged 3 to 9. Cheaper deals are available in advance online or in combination with your theme park admission. See Universal Orlando's website (p. 66) for details.

Florida's Other Major Theme Parks

SeaWorld ★ ALL AGES

7007 SeaWorld Drive, Orlando, 407 351 3600, www.seaworld.com.

One of the world's largest marine parks and extremely popular with British families, SeaWorld, with its shady landscaped grounds and large lake, is a less frantic experience than some of the other parks.

INSIDER TIP

The I-Ride Trolley (see p. 101) makes frequent stops at SeaWorld throughout the day. If you're staying on International Drive, travelling here by trolley is cheaper than paying for parking.

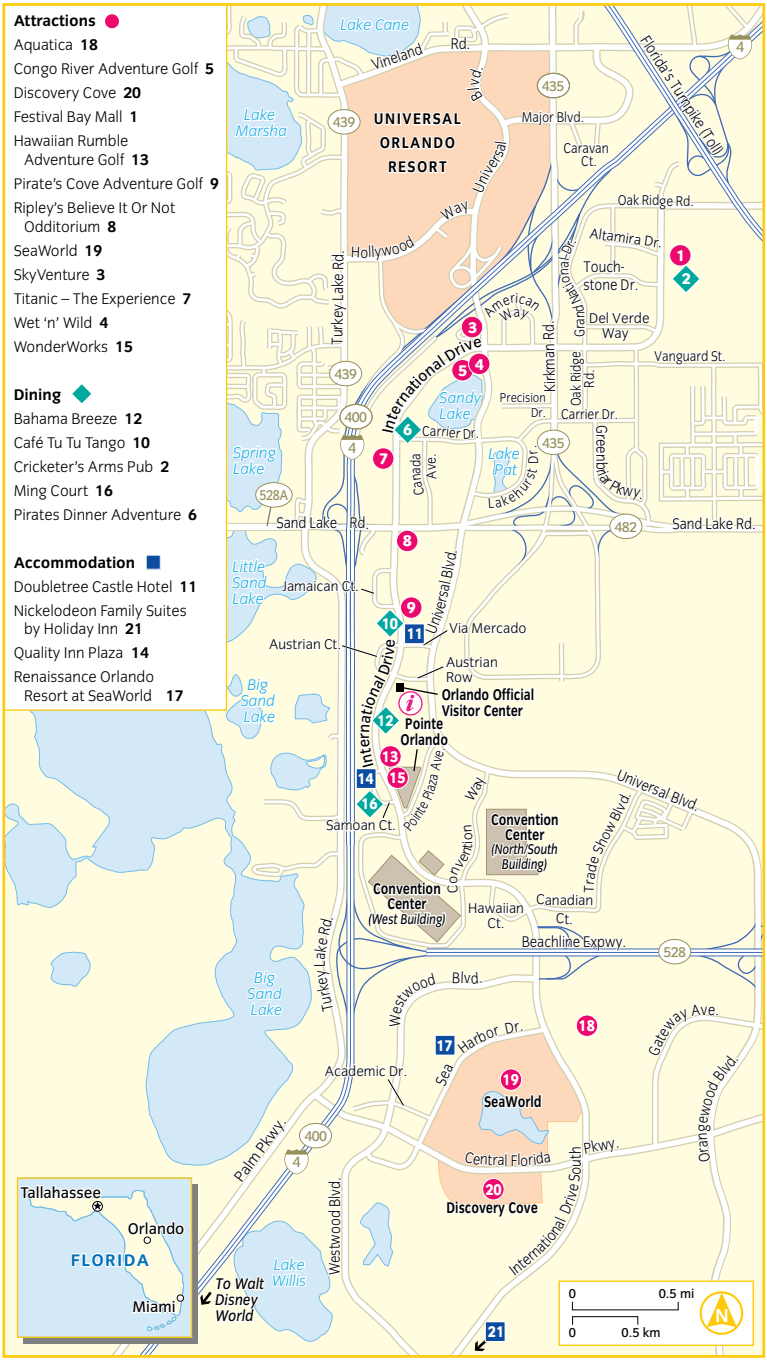
Visitors flock to SeaWorld to watch dolphins, sea lions, otters, penguins and tropical birds perform in its shows. There's even a show for young children called Pets Ahoy! featuring dogs, cats and pot-bellied pigs. However, the star show for all age groups is **Believe,** SeaWorld's memorable killer whale show staring Shamu – an awesome 8,000-pound killer whale – and friends. These incredible animals amaze audiences with their stunningly choreographed acrobatics and drench those sitting in the first 14 rows of the stadium.

Its sheer number of shows, including the fairytale-themed Blue Horizons performed by a troupe of beautiful dolphins and tropical birds, makes SeaWorld excellent for children on a very hot day, as they'll sit in the shade of the stages for much of a visit. The predominance of shows means you'll need to plan your day carefully around start times in order to fit everything in – pick up a park map and schedule at the entrance to the park as you arrive.

SeaWorld's other big draw for children is the chance to get up close to its animals, including penguins, manatees, alligators, sharks and the magnificent Clydesdale horses, all housed in various landscaped areas where you can learn all about these amazing creatures. Be sure to see the dolphin nursery, where you can watch expectant mothers and new-born calves at play, and, for those brave enough, there is the chance to pet sting rays in open tanks.

Older children will find plenty of attractions to keep them entertained, including the thrilling **Manta** ★★, a slick flying roller coaster, **Kraken** ★★, the steepest roller coaster in Orlando and **Journey to Atlantis** ★, a water ride and roller coaster combination. Catch these rides when one of the shows is in full swing and the wait time is reduced. Also popular is the exhilarating **Wild Arctic,** where you experience

INTERNATIONAL DRIVE



Height Restrictions at SeaWorld

Paddle Boats – 56 inches or accompanied by a supervising companion but no hand-held infants

Kraken and Manta – 54 inches

Sky Tower – 48 inches or accompanied by a supervising companion

Jazzy Jellies – 42 inches or accompanied by a supervising companion but no hand-held infants

Journey to Atlantis – 42 inches but 42 inches to 48 inches must be accompanied by a supervising companion

Shamu Express – 38 inches but 38 inches to 41 inches must be accompanied by a supervising companion

Swishy Fishes – 36 inches or accompanied by a supervising companion but no hand-held infants

breathtaking simulations of the frozen north (be warned, young children may suffer from motion sickness on this ride).

There's a range of small attractions at a nominal extra cost, including the Sky Tower (US$3) a 400-foot scenic aerial ride above the park, plus the Xtreme Zone, where children can try their hand at rock climbing (US$6).

INSIDER TIP

Parents with older children who want to wander off can keep in touch with them via rented walkie talkies.

Shamu's Happy Harbour, to the right of the whale's stadium, is a 3-acre play area with net jungles, water cannon and fountains for small children to let off steam in and includes a baby-care centre. And Shamu & Crew characters meet and greet visitors at the front entrance every morning from 9am to noon. For an extra cost there's a range of tours and animal encounters for adults and children that can be booked on arrival or online – check SeaWorld's website for full details.

Open *9am–between 6pm and 10pm depending on the time of year.* ***Adm*** *US$79, US$69 children aged 3–9, under 3s free. These prices are based on a 1-day one-park deal. See SeaWorld's website (p. 74) for many other combinations and deals.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Discovery Cove ALL AGES

Central Florida Parkway, Orlando, 407 370 1280, ***www.discoverycove.com****.*

With a distinct absence of rides and shows, Discovery Cove is the odd one out of Orlando's parks. You'll find 30 acres of lush, landscaped tropical gardens, tiny by Florida standards, all designed with relaxation in mind but with a high price tag attached.

There is a limit of 1,000 visitors per day, so book as far in advance as possible, as Discovery Cove gets full most days. Once inside, laze on the sandy beach or snorkel around the coral reef, complete with underwater shipwreck and teeming with tropical fish (the sharks and barracudas are kept safely behind glass). You can also pet sting rays in a separate lagoon and hand-feed exotic birds in large aviaries. If that sounds like hard work, simply float down the tropical river as it winds its way around the park.

INSIDER TIP

Don't put on any of your own sunscreen before coming here, Discovery Cove provides its own fish-friendly version for free.

Although snorkelling the recreated reef is popular, the main draw to this intimate park is the chance to interact with one of its 20 dolphins (for an extra US$100). Anyone aged over 6 can undertake a 30-minute session – plus a 10-minute orientation programme – during which you get up close to a dolphin under the supervision of its trainer. The session includes the chance to hold onto the animal's dorsal fin and be whizzed back to shore or a nervous child can cradle the dolphin in shallow waters.

Whether you partake in a dolphin encounter or not, this chilled-out park is a challenge for families with children who have lots of energy and want more in the way of entertainment. However, it's a good, if expensive, break from the more exhausting attractions.

Discovery Cove also offers Trainer for a Day programmes (US$489), an opportunity for children to spend a day working behind the scenes with one of the park's trainers. During the summer, a maximum of 150 guests a night can enjoy an evening of fine food and animal interaction through their Twilight Discovery Packages. For families who can't get enough of dolphins, Dolphin Lovers'

Discovery Cove

Sleepovers give you the chance to camp for the night on Discovery Cove's beach.

Open *9am–5:30pm, check-in opens at 8am.* ***Adm*** *US$169–US$189, with dolphin swim US$269–US$289, no reductions for children, under 2s free. Reservations essential. Admission includes complimentary food and drink, a free group photograph, use of wet suits, snorkel equipment and towels and a 7-day unlimited pass to either SeaWorld or Busch Gardens.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

For details of Aquatica, SeaWorld's water park, see p. 74.

Busch Gardens ALL AGES

3000 East Busch Boulevard, Tampa, *813 987 5283,* ***www.buschgardens.com****.*

Situated on the outskirts of Tampa and an easy day trip from Orlando, Busch Gardens is one of Florida's oldest attractions. The 335 acres of this veteran theme park are divided into eight lands, each depicting a different aspect of colonial Africa and each with its own style of attractions, shopping and dining, although none featuring any great display of enchantment.

It will take planning to fit everything Busch Gardens has on offer into 1 day, particularly as there's no fast-track system to reduce waiting times, so pick up a map and schedule of show times when you arrive and plan your day. However, this park's maps and signposting system are not that easy to follow, so allow plenty of time to reach show venues.

The main draw to Busch Gardens is its collection of roller-coaster rides. Fast, furious and not for the faint-hearted, these rides are unmatched by any other theme park for their thrill factor and are perfect for teenagers who love high-speed rides.

Busch Gardens is also one of America's largest zoos and there are various opportunities to get up close to the animals. On the 65 acres of Serengeti Plain you will encounter around 800 animals, including giraffes, zebras, rhinos, elephants, buffaloes, flamingos and antelopes. Look down on them from the Skyride monorail or, closer still, via an open-sided train.

The most family-friendly attractions at Busch Gardens are its flume rides; the Congo River Rapids is the most thrilling and the Tanganyika Tidal Wave gets you the wettest. Small children are catered for at the brand new Sesame Street Safari of Fun, a land filled with children's rides and splashy play areas. Families with young children should also head for Cheetah Chase, a children's roller coaster in Timbuktu and Rhino Rally's Off Road Adventure in Nairobi.

Shows on offer include KaTonga, a 35-minute celebration of animal folklore at the Moroccan Palace Theater, and Pirates 4-D, a 15-minute comedy adventure film starring Leslie Nielsen and Eric Idle at the Timbuktu Theater, both of which are aimed at all age groups.

SheiKra, Busch Gardens

For those addicted to thrill rides, the most terrifying is **SheiKra** ★★★, a floorless roller coaster which hurtles riders down a 200-foot drop at a 90-degree angle. Other high-adrenaline attractions are **Gwazi,** a wooden roller coaster that reaches speeds of 100 mph and **Kumba** ★, with a large vertical loop giving riders a full 3 seconds of weightlessness. Queuing for these rides can take as long as 90 minutes during busy periods. The only way to avoid them is to arrive early.

Jungala is Busch Gardens' latest addition and the place to get up close to Bengal tigers and orangutans or explore a maze of rope bridges, while families with animal-loving children should check the park's schedule for Meet the Keeper times. There's also a programme of educational and behind-the-scenes tours starting at US$25 per person. For details of both of these, visit the information point near the Desert Grill restaurant in Timbuktu or book in advance via Busch Gardens' website (see above).

INSIDER TIP

A number of rides are closed in Busch Gardens if it rains. If rain has ruined your visit, stop by Guest Services (to the left of the main tram stop) on your way out to be issued with a complimentary ticket valid for 7 days.

Open *Between 9–10am and closes between 5–10:30pm depending on time of year, car park opens half an hour before the park.* ***Adm*** *US$7, US$60 children aged 3–9, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Kennedy Space Center ★★★

AGE 5 & UP

NASA Parkway (SR-405), 321 449 444, www.kennedyspacecenter.com.

A family highlight, whether your children are smitten with the space bug or not, the Kennedy Space Center sits on the east coast parallel with, and about a 45-minute drive from, Orlando. The Center is set up in a theme-park style that makes learning about America's space programme fun and interactive. The subject matter and attractions are a bit much for pre-school- age children, although it does cater for all age groups by providing areas such as the Children's Play Dome.

Visiting the Space Center is a two-part experience. The first, and more entertaining for children, is the Visitor Complex, situated a short walking distance from the car park. Don't miss the amazing IMAX theatre shows featuring a shuttle launch and breathtaking views of the earth from space, or the exhilarating **Shuttle Launch Experience** ★★★ (48in height restriction), where you're strapped into a simulated shuttle to experience take off. Children love the life-size replica of the Space Shuttle Explorer; peer into the cockpit to see just how small it is.

At the time of going to press a new, interactive, high-energy attraction **Exploration Space: Explorers Wanted** is all set to open and showcase the thrills and challenges of space exploration, while, hopefully, inspiring a few young minds along the way.

Don't miss out on all the history and memorabilia on show, such as the actual old Mercury Mission Controls and the chance to walk through the access arm that Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins used to enter the Saturn V rocket that took them to the moon. Also worth making time for is the twice daily Astronaut Encounter – a chance to listen to the memories and question the men and women who have travelled into space.

The second part of a visit consists of a 2-to-3-hour-long bus

Height & Age Restrictions at Busch Gardens

Cheetah Chase – 46 inches and 6 years old

Congo River Rapids, Scorpion, Sandstorm and (accompanied by an adult) bumper cars – 42 inches

Gwazi, Phoenix and Tanganyika Tidal Wave – 48 inches

Kumba, Montu and SheiKra – 54 inches

Serengeti Safari and Animal Adventure Tour – 5 years old (accompanied by an adult)

Stanley Falls Log Flume – 46 inches or 2 years of age accompanied by an adult

FUN FACT **Flying the Biggest Flag**

The American flag on the side of the Vehicle Assembly Building is 209 feet tall and 110 feet wide, making it the largest painted flag in the US.

tour of NASA's inner workings. These tours depart every 15 minutes from the Visitor Complex from 10am to 2:15pm; do the tour first, as waiting times get longer as the day goes on. The tour passes the enormous Vehicle Assembly Building, where space shuttles were built and rolled out onto the launch pad. You'll get to view these pads from a distance, but best of all is getting up close to the breathtaking 363-foot-long Saturn V rocket – the Space Center's crown jewels and still the only thing on earth that can take you to another planet.

Not the most thrilling, but perhaps the most nostalgic, part of the tour for adults is the Lunar Theater and its depiction of the first moon landing.

INSIDER TIP

Make sure your children go to the lavatory before embarking on the bus tour; there's only one set of toilets along the way.

Also included in the admission price is entry to the Astronaut Hall of Fame (open 9am–6:30/7pm), situated 6 miles west of the main visitor complex on SR-405. Here, space fanatics can explore a collection of astronaut artefacts and experience two great simulations: G-Force Trainer and a ride across the moon's rocky terrain – both are popular with children. It's hard to cram everything the Kennedy Space Center has to offer into 1 day, so tickets are valid for 2 – just get yours

US Astronaut Hall of Fame® at Kennedy Space Center

FUN FACT **The International Space Station**

The International Space Station is a laboratory in permanent orbit 220 miles above the earth. It circles the globe every 90 minutes and to find out where it is now, check ***http://external.jsc.nasa.gov/events/ISSPhotos/***.

stamped on leaving and you can return again within 7 days.

A selection of additional, more specialised tours and an Astronaut Training Experience are also available at an extra cost. See the Kennedy Space Center's website (see p. 80) for more information and prices.

Open *9am–5:30/6pm.* ***Adm*** *US$38, US$28 children aged 3–11, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

Magic Kingdom

The pick of this park's quick service eateries are both in Adventureland. Aloha Isle serves vegetarian options and has the best shaded eating area, while El Pirata y el Perico dishes up substantial Mexican fare. For a sit-down meal of soups and sandwiches, try the peaceful Plaza Restaurant tucked away off Main Street USA, (US$15–US$29), which is easier to get a booking at than other places. And the ultimate treat for the princess in your family is a meal at Cinderella's Royal Table in the heart of her castle. Here you can dine with Cinderella and a princess at breakfast and lunch (mains US$30 adults, US$20 children) or with Cinderella and her fairy godmother for dinner (mains US$40 adults, US$30 children). This experience of a lifetime should be booked well in advance via the reservations number on p. 61 or call from 6am on the day of your visit to see if there have been any cancellations.

Epcot

Each of the World Showcase's pavilions has an excellent selection of dining options. Modelled after a 1692 hacienda, complete with its own smoking volcano, the San Angel Inn in Mexico is my family favourite (lunch and dinner mains US$15–US$29) – book a table as soon as you arrive. The Rose & Crown pub in the United Kingdom pavilion is a honey pot for Brits desperate for a (rather expensive) pint of beer and traditional pub grub, including fish and chips (US$15). Reservations are advised for the Garden Grille inside The Land section of Future World, where the rotating booths are super-popular with small children (mains US$20 adults, US$12 children). There's also an excellent Seasons food court offering a variety that

will appeal to families who can't agree on what to eat.

INSIDER TIP

Food lovers should plan to visit Disney in late autumn when Epcot hosts an International Food & Wine Festival.

Disney's Hollywood Studios

It's not surprising that a theme park celebrating entertainment is where you'll find some of the most inventive family dining in Florida. The **Sci-Fi Dine-In** ★★★ is modelled after a 1950s' drive-in movie theatre. Here you'll dine under starlight inside model vintage cars, while watching clips from classic B-movies on a huge movie screen (mains US$12–US$20 adults, US$9 children). Everyone is treated like a child at the **Prime Time Cafe** ★★, a 50s-style kitchen where mom makes you clean your plate and old sit-coms play on retro TVs – their excellent milkshakes come with or without alcohol (mains US$12–US$20 adults, US$9 children).

Animal Kingdom

The Rainbow Cafe near this park's entrance with its large fish tank, erupting volcano, waterfalls and even the occasional thunderstorm, is Animal Kingdom's wackiest eatery. It also has an entrance outside of the park and opens for breakfast from 8:30am (mains US$10–US$28 adults, US$8 children). The Yak and Yeti restaurant in Asia is themed in the style of a Nepalese grand house and dishes up imaginative helpings of Asian cuisine (mains US$12–US$30 adults, US$9 children).

Universal Studios & Islands of Adventure

In Universal Studios, table service is available at Finnegan's Bar and Grille in New York and Lombard's Seafood Grille in San Francisco, the latter has a picturesque waterfront setting and vegetarian options (mains US$13, children's menu for the under 9s). Monster's Cafe in Production Central, easily identified by Frankenstein on its roof, is popular with children and serves pasta and pizzas for around US$8. While Mel's Drive-In, a 50s-style diner in Hollywood, is a cool place for teens to hang out, listen to live music and keep their eyes open for the Marilyn Monroe look-a-like who often cruises by.

In Islands of Adventure, the Mythos restaurant is themed to look as though it has been carved from rock and is claimed by many families to be the best restaurant in any theme park (mains around US$15, children's menu for the under 9s). However, for pre-school-age children, the Circus McGurkus Cafe Stoo-pendous in Seuss Landing, with its burgers, pizza and chicken dishes for around US$9, is the only place to eat. Once inside the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, hungry

families should aim for the Three Broomsticks tavern to down a pint of Butterbeer and choose from a pub grub dominated menu (prices not available at the time of going to press).

Also see CityWalk p. 73 for more eating options at Universal Orlando.

INSIDER TIP

Universal operates a Meal Deal system that allows you to eat as much as you want at certain restaurants inside its two parks. A one-park meal deal costs US$20, US$9 children under 9 and a two-park meal deal ticket costs US$23 adults, US$12 children under 9. For an extra US$9 for all ages, an additional Sipper Cup deal can be purchased, allowing unlimited soft drinks.

SeaWorld

There are numerous restaurants, cafés and takeaway stands throughout SeaWorld, plus a picnic area near the entrance. Most venues serve children's meals and I like the Spice Mill with its pleasant views of SeaWorld's large lake and a menu including vegetable chilli and a range of burgers (from US$12). For table service head to Sharks Underwater Grill (mains US$22–US$29, children's menu for the under 12s), where you'll eat surrounded by water tanks containing 30 sharks. This restaurant opens for reservations at 10am; get there as soon as possible to book a table. However, SeaWorld's ultimate restaurant experience for many children is dining with Shamu (US$42, US$22 children aged 3–9), a buffet-style evening meal served alongside the killer whale tank with close-up views of behind-the-scenes training exercises. Prior reservations to this and SeaWorld's other themed dining experiences can be made through the park's website – ***www.seaworld.com***.

Busch Gardens

Busch Gardens' eating options are the most limited of all the major attractions, being, on the whole, fast, fried and overpriced. The main options are the Zagora café near the entrance in Morocco; the Desert Grill fast food restaurant in Timbuktu – whose dark-themed hall is a welcome relief from the midday heat and whose stage provides regular entertainment – and the Crown Colony House Restaurant, which has a good view of the Serengeti Plain and whose menu features some salads and fruit options for US$12 and sandwiches for US$10 – there's a table service with the same menu upstairs. Wherever you eat, the children's menu features hot dogs, fries and chicken strips for around US$8.

Kennedy Space Center

The main dining option on offer is the Orbit café situated in the Visitor Complex, which serves a range of fast food including pizza, sandwiches and veggie wraps for around US$10 and children's meals for US$5. If your children

develop the munchies while on the long bus tour, then schedule in a stop at the Moon Rock café at the Apollo/Saturn V Center en route.

Or families can have lunch with an astronaut (US$23 adults, US$16 children), during which you can chat, have your photographs taken with and get autographs from one of the few people who've been into space. Make a reservation for this at the ticket plaza when you arrive or *321 449 4400* to book in advance.

Also see the Family-Friendly Dining section of the Central Florida chapter on p. 106.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

From luxury resorts to wilderness cabins, Disney offers a large choice of family-friendly accommodation to suit all budgets. For an overview of options, access the 'Where to Stay' section of Walt Disney World's website via its homepage: ***http://disneyworld.disney.go.com***.

If you plan to stay near Downtown Disney, there are another seven 'official' hotels that are endorsed but not owned by Disney. Check ***www.downtowndisneyhotels.com*** for details. Information on the three Universal resorts can be found on Universal's website, ***www.universalorlando.com***. Some of Disney's, and all of Universal's, accommodation options are part of the Florida Green Lodging programme (see p. 38). Listed here is a selection of my favourite family-friendly accommodation options linked to the major attractions.

EXPENSIVE/VERY EXPENSIVE

Animal Kingdom Lodge ★★★ GREEN

*2901 Osceola Parkway, Lake Buena Vista, Orlando, 407 934 7639, **http://disneyworld.disney.go.com**.*

This sumptuous hotel tucked away in the far southwestern corner of Walt Disney World, close to Animal Kingdom, is a firm favourite with families. Furnished in the style of an African game reserve lodge, with thatched roofs, dark mahogany furnishings, rich tapestries and warm colours, the highlight of Animal Kingdom Lodge is its 33-acre savannah, where giraffes, zebra, wildebeest and exotic birds flourish. The theme extends to the hotel's restaurants, with three of its four dining options serving African-influenced cuisine. There's a varied range of children's activities from safaris to storytelling and, best of all, night-vision goggles through which they can watch the animals as darkness falls. The only downside is that you're away from most of Disney's theme parks and other attractions, but they're all reachable via Disney's frequent and free bus service.

***Rooms** 1,681. **Rates** Standard rooms (sleep up to 4) US$240–US$510, suites (sleep 6–8) US$760–US$2,255 (children under 17 stay free in parents'*

Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, © Disney

room). ***Credit*** *AE, MC, DC, DISC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Disney's Polynesian Resort ★ GREEN

1600 Seven Seas Drive, Lake Buena Vista, 407 824 2000, ***http://disneyworld.disney.go.com****.*

Close to Magic Kingdom (there's a boat service to this park across the Seven Seas Lagoon), the Polynesian is styled after a South Seas tropical island resort. The beach area is superb and features two heated outdoor pools, one with a volcano theme and grotto slide, children's play area and hammocks. There's a real focus on outdoor recreation, as guests can rent pontoon boats, play volleyball, go fishing and enjoy a scenic jogging trail. The big draw for families is its excellent Never Land childcare club for children aged 4 to 12, which provides supervised evening activities, leaving parents free to enjoy evenings out alone. The resort's family-friendly Ohana (Hawaiian for family) restaurant serves an excellent Polynesian buffet. This is the best Disney resort to stay in if you want to explore farther afield but don't want to rent a car, as the Ticket and Transportation Center, where the buses pull in (see p. 60), is next door.

Rooms *847.* ***Rates*** *Standard rooms (sleep up to 5) US$365–US$630, suites (sleep between 5 and 9) US$845–US$2,110 (children under 17 stay free in parents' room).* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Hard Rock Hotel ★★ GREEN

5800 Universal Boulevard, Orlando, 407 503 7625, ***www.universalorlando.com****.*

One of the most stylish places to stay in Florida for any family with school-age children, and a must if your youngsters are into certain kinds of music, the Hard Rock Hotel, with its priceless collection of rock memorabilia – yes my favourite is the Elvis outfit – is one of Orlando's funkiest hotels. It's worth staying here for the enormous pool alone, with its white sand beach, 260-foot-long water slide and amazing underwater sound system. There's plenty of evening activities for families, including DJ nights and films, a supervised children's play area, programme of children's activities and evening childcare available for a fee until 11pm Sunday to Thursday and until midnight Friday and Saturday. You can choose between cheaper room-style accommodation or more expensive suites that provide separate sleeping areas for children, complete with their own TV and video games.

Rooms *650 rooms, 29 suites.* ***Rates*** *Rooms US$234–US$404, suites US$484–US$704 (under 18s stay free in the same room).* **Credit** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE

Renaissance Orlando Resort at SeaWorld GREEN

6677 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, 407 351 5555, ***www.renaissanceseaworld.com****.*

Situated just minutes from the buzz of International Drive and a short walk from SeaWorld and Discovery Cove, the Renaissance Orlando is a simple stylish hotel that's well located for getting to all of the major attractions. Like the hotel as a whole, the rooms are airy and spacious and I particularly like the oversized bathrooms. There are numerous recreation opportunities including the tropically landscaped pool – a perfect place to recover

Hard Rock Hotel, © 2007 Universal Orlando Resort. All rights reserved.

Additional Accommodation

There is a host of chain motels in Tampa around Busch Gardens. The closest (you can walk to Busch Gardens from it), but not the nicest, is the **Safari Lodge** at Busch Gardens Maingate 4139 E. Busch Boulevard (*813 988 9191)* rooms around US$99. Also recommended, though slightly farther away, are the **Holiday Inn Express** and **Suites 2807** E. Busch Boulevard (*813 936 8200*) rooms around US$100, **Best Western** 3001 University Center Drive (*813 971 8930*) rooms around US$90 and **La Quinta Inn** 9202 N. 30th Street (*813 930 6900*) rooms around US$75. See p. 142 for additional accommodation in the Tampa area. For accommodation close to the Kennedy Space Center, see the Family-Friendly Accommodation section of the East Coast chapter on p. 173; for more on accommodation in central Florida not linked to the main attractions, see p. 109.

from a day at a theme park – and children's pool, play area and games room.

Rooms *714 rooms, 64 suites.* ***Rates*** *US$189–US$429 (children under 17 stay free in parents' room).* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

BUDGET/MODERATE

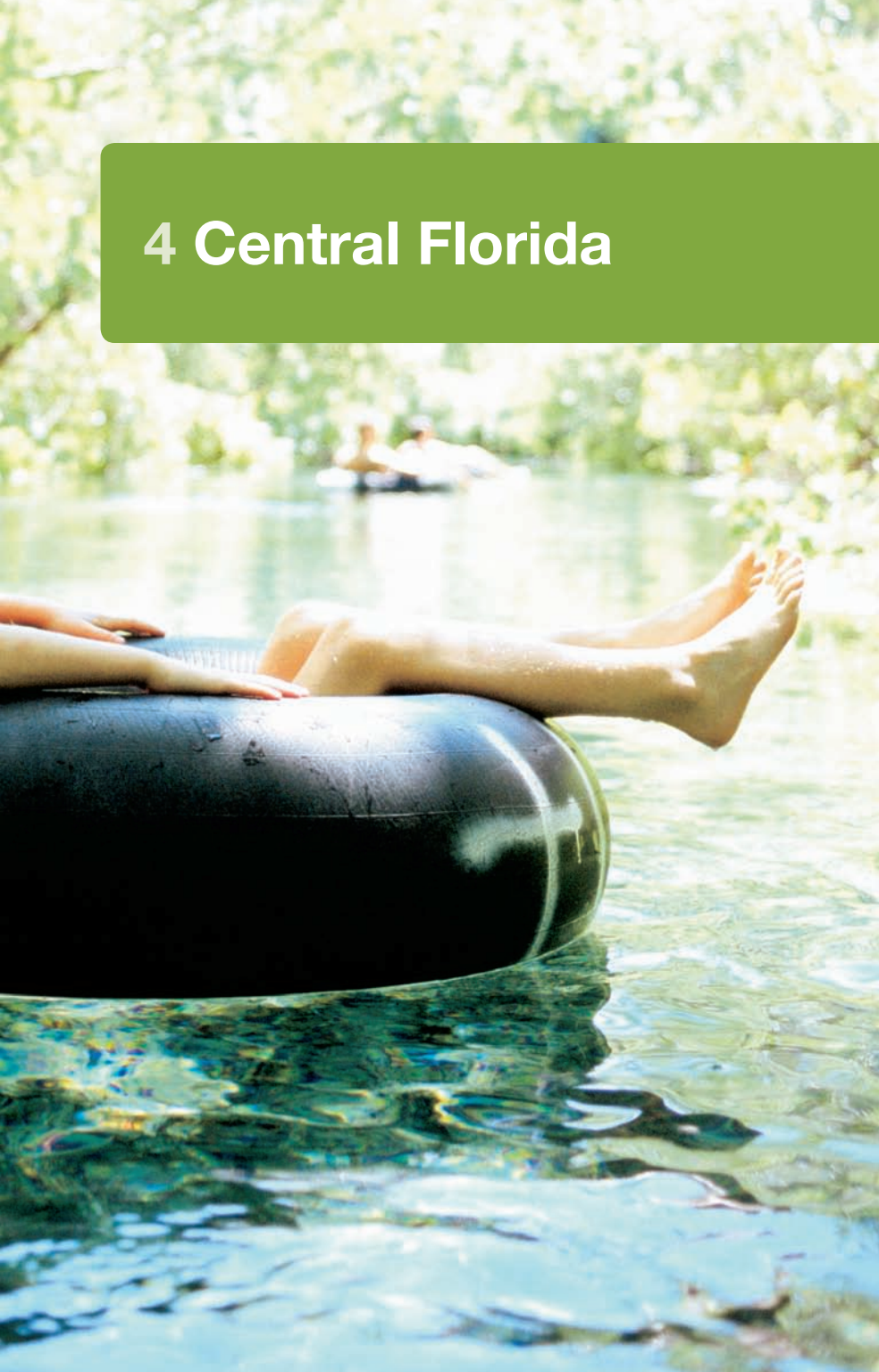
Disney's Pop Century Resort VALUE GREEN

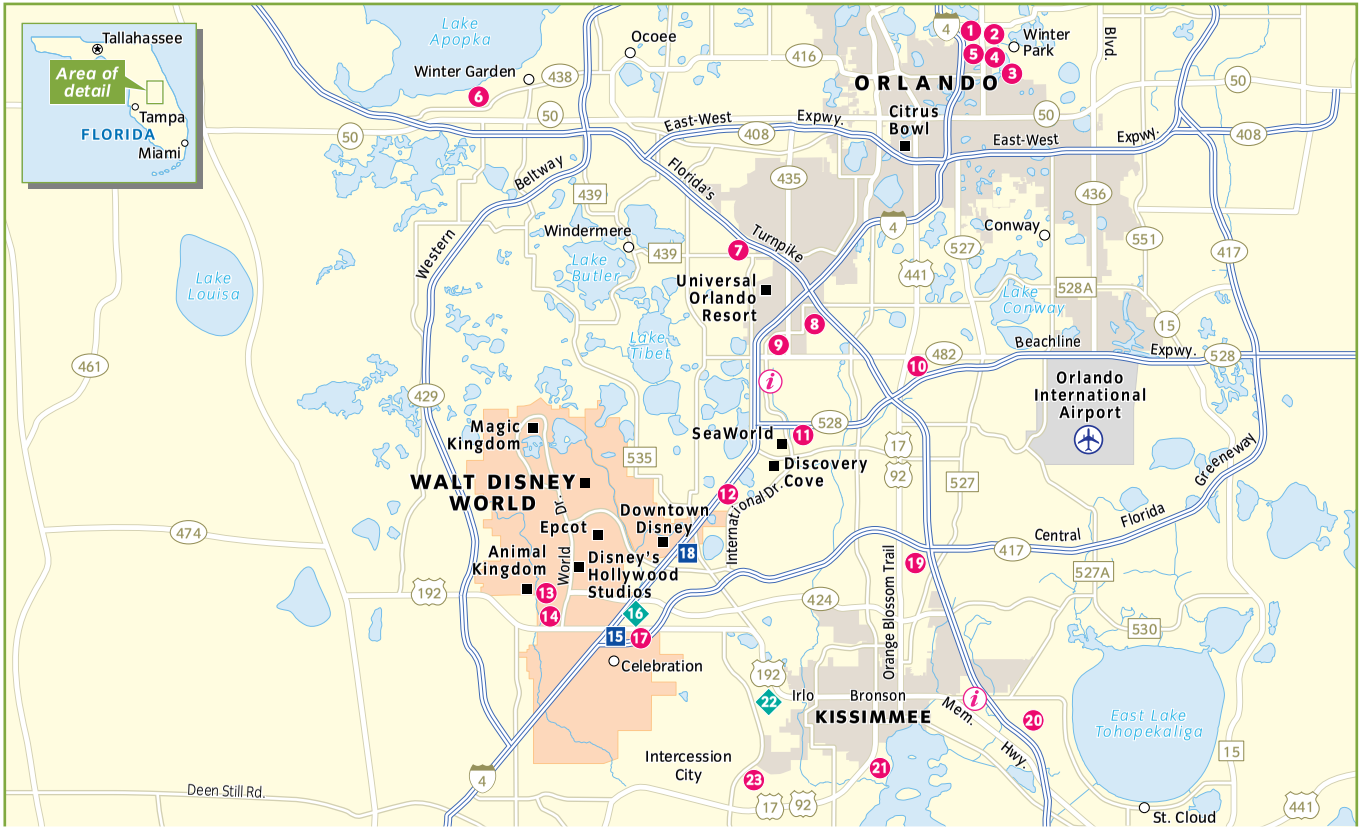
1050 Century Drive, Lake Buena Vista, 407 938 4000, http://disneyworld.disney.go.com.

Themed around 20th-century popular culture and featuring icons such as an enormous Rubik's Cube and a swimming pool shaped like a computer, the Pop Century Resort is one of Disney's four value resorts – the others are styled around music, Disney films and sport. Although this resort has none of the frills of many Disney hotels, I like it because its low prices enable families on restricted budgets to stay at Walt Disney World and enjoy the related benefits. Despite its basic nature, there's plenty to keep children entertained, such as poolside water fountains, games rooms and play areas. This hotel's only limitation is its dining. The main option is a colourful food court serving fast food, but there's also a food shop with healthier items to take away. The rooms are on the small side compared with other Disney resorts, but still maintain a good standard.

Rooms *2,880.* ***Rates*** *Standard rooms (sleep up to 4) from US$82.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

4 Central Florida




Tallahassee
Area of detail
Tampa
FLORIDA
Miami
Lake Apopka
Ocoee
Winter Garden
Winter Park
ORLANDO
Citrus Bowl
East-West Expwy.
Beltway
Florida's Turnpike
Western
Windermere
Lake Butler
Lake Louisa
Universal Orlando Resort
Conway
Lake Conway
Lake Tibet
Beachline Expwy.
Orlando International Airport
Magic Kingdom
WALT DISNEY WORLD
SeaWorld
Discovery Cove
International Dr.
Downtown Disney
Epcot
Animal Kingdom
Disney's Hollywood Studios
World Dr.
Central Florida Greeneway
Orange Blossom Trail
Celebration
Intercession City
Irlo Bronson Mem. Hwy.
KISSIMMEE
East Lake Tohopekaliga
St. Cloud
Deen Still Rd.
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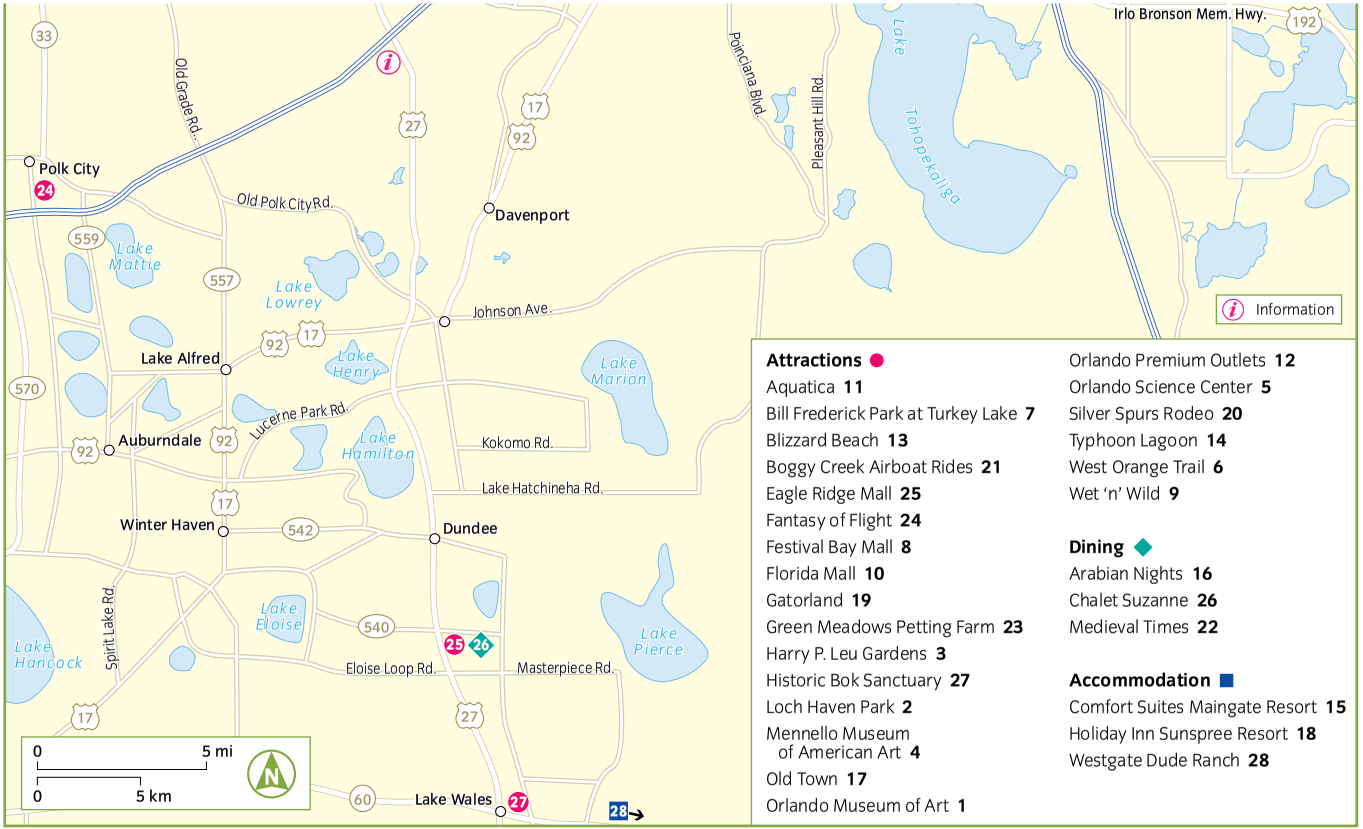

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Ever since Walt Disney bought land and opened up theme parks in central Florida, a deluge of further tourist attractions, from the tasteful to the tacky, and thousands of new hotels and restaurants have transformed this region. For the first-time family Central Florida can be confusing, as it consists of a number of areas each with its own distinct personality and appeal. Standing in the middle of them all is the modern city of Orlando – most visitors never see the glittering high rises, as the bulk of the tourist-focused entertainment clusters around the likes of Walt Disney World and Orlando Universal on the city's outskirts.

However, the city itself is home to a number of memorable cultural and educational attractions, all of which perfectly compliment the region's many theme and water parks.

Although this area is most attractive to families seeking the big thrill buzz of these high profile attractions, some also take time to discover the quieter side to central Florida waiting to be explored in the laid-back small towns that lie further afield. And it's surprising just how quickly Orlando's network of built-up highways gives way to empty countryside, dotted with less glitzy attractions and a multitude of ways of getting back to nature.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Orlando's Official Visitor Center (8723 International Drive, *407 363 5872, www.orlandoinfo.com*) is open daily 8:30am to 6:30pm. The ticket desk shuts at 6pm. Pick up information on all of Orlando's attractions, accommodation and dining, and book discounted tickets here. You can also order a holiday-planning kit in advance via the UK website, *www.orlandoinfo.com/uk*.

INSIDER TIP

Tourists are advised to be wary of the many 'unofficial' Visitor Information Centers along International Drive and Hwy-192. Orlando's Official Visitor Center is hard to find as it's tucked away off International Drive and poorly signposted, but make the effort if you want reliable advice.

Central Florida's Visitor Center – Polk Outpost 27 – is located southwest of Orlando on Hwy-27, half a mile south of Exit 55 off I-4 (*800 828 7655, www.visitcentralflorida.org*) and is open daily 9am to 6pm. At this excellent and interactive centre you can take a virtual balloon ride over the local area, e-mail family and friends for free, visit their Discovery Dock to find out about the region's nature-orientated activities and pick up plenty of information on, and discounts to, central Florida's attractions.

The Kissimmee-St. Cloud Visitors' Bureau (1925 E Hwy-92, *407 847 8200, www.floridakiss.com*, open Mon–Fri

8am–5pm) is a good source of information and discounts for the south of the region.

INSIDER TIP
For family-friendly advice on holidaying in central Florida, see *www.travel-insights.com*.

Orientation

Central Florida consists of a number of distinct regions, most of which are clustered around Orlando.

Focused around Hwy-192 (Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway) to the south of Orlando is the small town of Kissimmee.

Walt Disney World is located southwest of Orlando.

To the northeast of Walt Disney World and skirted by SR-535 is Lake Buena Vista.

And running parallel with, and east of, I-4 from Hwy-192 to Universal Orlando is International Drive (Hwy-536).

Farther afield, Hwy-27 runs through the centre of Polk County to the southwest of Walt Disney World, where a number of attractions are located.

Arriving

By Plane Central Florida's main airport, Orlando International Airport (*407 825 2001, www.orlandoairports.net*) is situated 9 miles southeast of Orlando, while Orlando Sanford International Airport (*407 585 4000, www.orlandosanfordairport.com*) located 18 miles northeast of Orlando, is also popular with package-tour operators.

Both airports are served by Mears Transportation (*407 432 5566*), who operate taxi and shuttle bus services to any accommodation in the Orlando area. They have a desk at Orlando International Airport and you can book in advance online at *www.mearstransportation.com*. Online reservations for Orlando Sanford International Airport are not available: call the Mears number to book transport from this airport.

For details of package tours and flights to Florida, see p. 29.

By Car Two of Florida's major roads – I-4 and the Florida Turnpike – cross on the southwestern outskirts of Orlando. If you're driving from the southeast or northwest you'll arrive via the Florida Turnpike and from the northeast or southwest via I-4. Those travelling directly east arrive via SR-528 – the Bee Line Expressway.

Getting Around

The most convenient way to travel around central Florida is by car, but the traffic can be heavy, so allow plenty of time for your journey – especially during peak periods. For details of car hire, see p. 31.

INSIDER TIP
The Orange County Convention Center, sprawled across both sides of International Drive at the junction with SR-528, hosts massive conventions. At these times, sections of the road are impossible to drive. Take Universal Boulevard instead.

Discount Cards

Of the mind-blowing array of ticket deals and discounts available in central Florida, two cards are really useful. The free **Orlando Magicard** is available from the Official Visitor Center (see p. 92) or can be downloaded and printed from their website (***www.orlandoinfo.com/uk/magicard***) and offers discounts to numerous regional attractions, shops and restaurants. The **Go Orlando Card** (***www.goorlandocard.com***) permits entry to many attractions, tours and dinner shows in central Florida – including the Kennedy Space Center – and can be purchased in denominations of between 1 and 7 days. All days purchased must be used over a 2-week period and prices range from US$75, US$60 children under 12 for 1 day to US$265, US$200 children under 12 for 7 days. Go Orlando Cards can be purchased through the website above or at the Official Visitor Center of International Drive (see p. 92). For more information on ticket deals, see p. 20.

If you're in Florida for the theme parks and staying in a hotel, there's little reason to rent a car – see p. 60 for alternatives.

Orlando's public bus service is operated by Lynx Buses (*407 841 5969*, ***www.golynx.com***) and the Official Visitor Center (see p. 92) has information on how to get to all the major attractions and the airport by bus. The I-Ride Trolley (see p. 101) is the easiest way to get up and down International Drive.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Children's Top Five Attractions

1. **A flight** in a vintage biplane at Fantasy of Flight; p. 96.
2. **Riding the waves** at Aquatica's Cutback Cove & Big Surf Shores; p. 98.
3. **Lunch at** Chalet Suzanne; p. 108.
4. **Discovering** central Florida's wild side on an airboat tour ride; p. 103.
5. **Staying at** Westgate River Ranch and watching the Saturday night rodeo; p. 112.

Child-Friendly Festivals & Events

The Great American Pie Festival

*Celebration, 407 644 2636, **www.piecouncil.org**.*

Every April (check website for exact dates) Lakeside Park in Celebration hosts The Great American Pie Festival – 2 days

of pie tasting, pie-eating contests, children's games, pie making and even pie tin art. Winning pies feature in the festival's Never Ending Pie Buffet. Admission is free, tickets to the buffet are US$10, US$6 children aged 5 to 10. For more information on Celebration, see Days Out In Central Florida box on p. 105.

Silver Spurs Rodeo

Silver Spurs Arena, Osceola Heritage Park, 1875 Silver Spur Lane, off Hwy-192, Kissimmee, 407 677 6336, www.silverspursrodeo.com.

Founded in 1944, the Silver Spurs Rodeo is one of the US's top 20 rodeos. Silver Spurs features afternoon and evening events when America's best professional rodeo cowboys pit their wits and reflexes against bucking bulls and bareback horses.

There are also barrel racing and cowboy clowns to entertain all ages. Tickets can be bought on the gate or in advance by phone. Silver Spurs is held twice yearly in February and October (check website for dates and times).

***Adm** US$15, children under 10 free with a paying adult. **Credit** MC, V.*

For child-friendly festivals and events in the theme parks, see p. 94.

Top Family Attractions

Fantasy of Flight ★★ AGE 5 & UP

1400 Broadway Boulevard, S.E. Polk City, 863 984 3500, www.fantasyofflight.com.

Enter Fantasy of Flight's enormous hangers, home to the world's largest private collection of vintage aircraft, through a themed recreation of aviation history up until WW2. Clambering into a WW2 B26 bomber is the best bit! Once inside you are surrounded by historic and famous planes, including ones that featured in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Rocket Boy*. The interactive education centre is filled with games and simulators that teach the science of flight. You don't have to be an aviation enthusiast to enjoy this museum, but the undoubted highlight of a visit is a shared flight in a vintage biplane that seats up to four (US$70 per person, helmets and goggles included!). Biplane rides are available daily October to May, Wednesday to Sunday June to August, weather permitting. To book a flight *863 873 1339* or see *www.waldowrights.com*.

Time** 1 hr. **Open** 10am–5pm daily. **Adm** US$29, US$15 children aged 6–15, under 6s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

FUN FACT **A Lot of Pies**

If all the pies sold in the US at Thanksgiving were lined up, they would stretch over halfway around the world.

Fantasy of Flight

Gatorland ALL AGES

14501 S Orange Blossom Trail, Orlando, 407 855 5496, www.gatorland.com.

Despite stiff competition from central Florida's high-profile theme parks, this old-time attraction still packs a fun-filled punch and pulls a family-orientated crowd. After entering through enormous gaping gator jaws, expect to spend up to half a day getting close to, and learning more about, Florida's most famous reptile, along with a myriad of other wildlife.

A ride on the Gatorland Express, which cruises around the whole park, is a must for young children, who also enjoy the chance to feed and pet small animals such as deer, sheep, goats and ducks at Allie's Barnyard. However, alligators are the stars of the park and the most entertaining way to see them is at one of Gatorland's legendary shows where you'll be treated to the likes of gator wrestling and gator jumparoo, where large gators jump out of the water to snatch food from their trainer's hands. Don't miss spying on crocodiles from around the globe at Jungle Crocs of the World or, if you're an adventurous meat eater, the chance to tuck into gator ribs at Pearl's Smokehouse.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$23, US$15 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Green Meadows Petting Farm AGE 11 & UNDER

1368 South Poinciana Boulevard, Kissimmee, 407 846 0770, www.greenmeadowsfarm.com.

A far cry from all things Disney, Green Meadows Farm is a

Loch Haven Park

Located 3 miles north of downtown Orlando at Mills Avenue and Princeton Street, Loch Haven Park is a hub for the region's cultural attractions. Although the museums and theatres that cluster around this area are all good rainy day options, don't wait for bad weather to visit this area, where landscaped surrounds make for a shady place to walk and play. Here is a selection of some of Loch Haven Park's best family-friendly attractions.

Harry P. Leu Gardens 1920 N Forest Avenue, 407 246 2620, ***www.leugardens.org***, open daily 9am to 5pm, US$7 adults, US$2 children. Get lost and chill out in 50 acres of lush, peaceful gardens which include a tropical steam garden, butterfly garden, 3 miles of paved walkways and an airy garden house – a perfect antidote to Orlando's high-energy theme parks.

This is also the place to head for a cultural night out as Loch Haven Park is home to the Orlando Shakespeare Theater (***www.orlandoshakes.org)***, the Orlando Repertory Theater (***www.orlandorep.com)*** and the acclaimed Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra (***www.orlandophil.org***).

Mennello Museum of American Art AGE 13 & UP 900 E Princeton Street, 407 246 4278, ***www.mennellomuseum.com***, 10:30am to 4:30pm Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 4:30pm Sunday, US$4, under 12s free, time 1 hour, child-friendly tables laden with crayons and paper are on hand in the exhibition rooms of this small, cheerful museum where you can expect to spend up to an hour discovering a range of American art.

Orlando Museum of Art AGE 7 & UP 2416 North Mills Avenue, *407 896 4231*, ***www.omart.org***, 10am to 4pm Tuesday to Friday, noon to 4pm Saturday and Sunday; US$8 adults, US$5 children aged 6 to 18, under 6s free, time 1 hour. Here you'll find collections and changing exhibitions of ancient and modern American and African art and family-friendly guides are available to help young visitors understand the work on display.

Orlando Science Center ★★ AGE 3 & UP 777 East Princeton Street, 407 514 2000, ***www.osc.org***, open daily (except Wed) 10am to 5pm, US$17, US$12 children aged 3 to 11, under 3s free, time 3 hours. You'll need half a day to explore the 10 interactive exhibition areas that make up the Center where exhibits delve into the realms of science, agriculture and astronomy and can be as much fun for adults as children.

low-key, hands- on, animal-orientated day out with a focus on young children (under 11s). Visitors, young and old, are led on guided tours around the farm where you'll get to milk a cow, feed goats and pet other animals such as pigs, geese, chickens and even a water buffalo along the way. As well as discovering how a farm works, children can take a pony ride or hop aboard a tractor-drawn hay ride. This is a fine place to bring a picnic and get back to nature.

Time *1–2 hr.* ***Open*** *9:30am–4pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$21, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, DISC, V.* ***Amenities*** FREE

INSIDER TIP

Sunday is Family Day at Old Town and cheap ticket deals are available for the rides.

Old Town AGE 5 & UP

Hwy-192 (Marker No.9), Kissimmee, 407 396 4888, ***www.old-town.com****.*

Situated on Hwy-192, 3 miles east of Walt Disney World and easily identified by its large Ferris wheel, Old Town is a great place to wile away a couple of hours without forking out for any entrance fees. At the front of this old-fashioned attraction is a collection of rides for older children and teens, such as fun track go-carts, while at the back, away from the road, you'll find a cluster of gentle rides for youngsters including the ever-popular tea cups. Linking the two is an old southern USA-style street filled with quirky shops, amusement arcades and restaurants. Or you can just sit on a bench and watch classic old 1950s' cars cruise by.

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–11pm daily, rides 2–11pm Mon–Fri, noon–11pm Sat & Sun.* ***Adm*** *Old Town is free to enter, rides cost US$2–US$6.*

Amenities FREE

INSIDER TIP

Cypress Gardens in Winter Haven closed in 2009 and is in the process of being transformed into LEGOLAND Florida, which is scheduled to open at the end of 2011.

Top Water Parks

Aquatica ★★ ALL AGES

580 Water Play Way, 407 351 3600, ***www.aquaticabyseaworld.com****.*

Created by SeaWorld and inspired by the South Seas, Aquatica is central Florida's newest water park and a big hit with families. On entering you'll swing by Dolphin Plunge, a heart-thumping twin body slide that sends riders shooting down 300 feet of flumes and through a lagoon of black and white Commerson's dolphins. Past this ride the park opens out into a landscape of artificial beaches, swirling water rapids, colourful play areas and exhilarating rides. Cutback Cove and Big Surf Shores are Aquatica's two wave pools with the latter dishing up bigger waves and more suitable for older children. Both pools are faced by a wide expanse of white sand crammed with sun loungers (arrive early to bag a shady spot), or you can splash out on a

private, pool-side cabana (US$100–US$225 a day) which comes complete with lockers, towels, sunscreen and soft drinks. Dominating the centre of the park, Roa's Rapids swirls riders along a twisting river of water, while Walkabout Waters is an imaginative, splashy play area loved by young children. A number of water rides ring the edge of the park including Taumata Racer – an eight- lane, double-drop, mat ride – and Whanau Way – a high-speed, slide tower ride.

Time *Half to full day.* ***Open*** *Between 9–10am daily, closing times vary from 5–10pm.* ***Adm*** *US$48, US$42 children aged 3–9, under 3s free (ticket combination deals with SeaWorld available).* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Blizzard Beach ★★ ALL AGES

Walt Disney World, 407 560 3400, www.disneyworld.com.

Disney legend claims that once, during a cold winter, an entrepreneur tried to open a ski resort in Florida. The snow melted, leaving behind a mountain, alpine lodge and ski lift. It's nonsense of course, but makes for an inventive theme for an incredibly popular water park where sand and fake snow sit side by side. The 'ski jump' **Summit Plummet** ★★, which at 120 feet is America's tallest water slide, forms the park's focal point and gives riders panoramic views of Walt Disney World from the top. There are two other large-scale thrill rides – Slush Gusher and Downhill Double Dipper – and a range of less high-energy options. Ski Patrol Training Camp is an area specially created for pre-teens and features tunnel slides and iceberg walks, while very young children are catered for at Tike's Peak; here you'll find small rides and a fountain play area. However, one of the best ways for families to spend time together at Blizzard Beach is to float around Cross Country

Water Parks – The Top Tips

- You can take picnics into Blizzard Beach and Typhoon Lagoon, but no glass containers or alcohol are allowed. Visitors to Aquatica are only allowed to take bottled water and snacks into the park.
- After a thunderstorm, most water parks are very quiet, even during peak holiday periods.
- One-piece swimming costumes are less likely to come off on water slides than bikinis.
- All the parks have height restrictions on some rides.
- During busy periods, all water parks can be full by mid-morning. Either arrive early or sometime after mid-afternoon when visitors start to leave.

Wet 'n' Wild waterpark

Creek in an inner tube as it winds its lazy way around the whole park or simply splash around in Melt-Away Bay, a huge waterfall-fed pool.

Time *Half to full day.* ***Open*** *Between 9–10am daily, closing times vary from 5–8pm.* ***Adm*** *US$45, US$40 children aged 3–9, under 3s free (see p. 60 for Disney ticket deals).* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Typhoon Lagoon

★★★ ALL AGES

Walt Disney World, 407 560 4141, www.disneyworld.com.

Themed around a tropical island, Typhoon Lagoon is the place to head if you fancy a day at the beach but don't want to drive to the coast – yes, Disney thinks of everything! This park's big thrills are the **Crush 'n' Gusher** ★ water coaster and the speed slide **Humunga Kowabunga** ★★, while Gangplank Falls white-water rafting ride is one for all the family. Young children love the Ketchakiddee Creek play area and Bay Slides. Shark Reef comes complete with tropical fish and is a safe place for children to try snorkelling for the first time.

Typhoon Lagoon's rides are tucked away around the edge of a vast fake beach that forms the central focus of this park. Around this runs a charming creek where you get to float through grottos and rainforests. And this is the best water park to visit with youngsters, as playing on the sand is given equal prominence to shooting down the water slides.

Time *Half to full day.* ***Open*** *Between 9–10am daily, closing times vary from*

International Drive

www.internationaldriveorlando.com

Stretching from SR-536 and running north parallel with I-4, International Drive is a busy and tourist-focused strip crammed with hotels, restaurants, museums, galleries, tourist attractions and shops. There's something on I-Drive for all ages and many are within easy (and often tree-lined) walking distance. For those attractions a little further away, the **I-Ride Trolley** (***www.iridetrolley.com***) runs frequently and is a fun, hassle-free and cheap (single fare US$1.25, daily pass US$4, under 12s free) way to get around.

These are a selection of the family-friendly attractions on International Drive. For shopping, see p. 105, and for dining options, see p. 106.

WonderWorks AGE 7 & UP, 9067 International Drive, *407 351 8800, **www.wonderworksonline.com***, open daily 9am to midnight, US$20, US$15 children aged 4 to 12, under 4s free. Housed in an unmissable upside-down mansion, this mad attraction is full of interactive science-based displays and an energetic laser tag where you enter a large maze for a virtual shootout.

Ripley's Believe It Or Not Odditorium AGE 7 & UP, 8201 International Drive, *407 363 4418, **www.ripleysorlando.com***, open 9:30am to midnight daily, US$19, US$12 children aged 4 to 12, under 4s free, is a mad collection of weird, bizarre and barely believable artefacts from around the world. (There are also 'odditoriums' in Panama City Beach, St. Augustine and Key West. See ***www.ripleys.com*** for details of these locations.)

According to the ticket office, **Titanic – The Experience** AGE 7 & UP, 7324 International Drive, *407 248 1166, **www.titanictheexperience.com***, open 9am to 9pm daily, US$22, US$13 children aged 4 to 12, under 4s free, is more popular with women than men. Here you can wander through recreations of the interior of the famous but doomed 'ship of dreams' and get up close to movie memorabilia from James Cameron's equally famous film.

And for older children and adults, **SkyVenture** AGE 7 & UP, 6805 Visitors Circle (just off International Drive), *407 903 1150, **www.skyventureorlando.com,*** open Sunday to Thursday 11:30am to 9pm, Saturday and Sunday 11:30am to 10pm, US$45 per person, family packages available, is a thrilling freefall skydiving simulator where you get to 'fly' on a column of air.

5–8pm. ***Adm*** *US$45, US$40 children aged 3–9, under 3s free (see p. 60 for Disney ticket deals).* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Wet 'n' Wild ★ ALL AGES

6200 International Drive, 407 351 1800, www.wetnwild.com.

Located on a busy junction of International Drive and surrounded by railings, Wet 'n' Wild is not as secluded or slick as the region's other water parks, but it offers more rides and bigger thrills. Whole families can enjoy The Flyer, The Bubba Tub and **Disco H2O** ★ together. Older children seeking to pump up their adrenaline levels should head to **The Brain Wash** ★★, featuring a 53-foot vertical drop, and **The Storm** ★, where riders spin around a giant bowl before plunging into the water below. Only seasoned water park riders brave Der Stuka and Bomb Bay which both feature near vertical body slides, while the revamped Black Hole: the Next Generation is a two-person ride complete with exhilarating special effects. For small children, the Kids Park contains miniature versions of the thrill rides and the brilliant Bubble Up, a large water-covered inflatable bubble to bounce around on. Chill out on The Lazy River, float in the large wave pool, enjoy a game of volleyball or just lie back and sunbathe.

Keep a firm eye on little ones when Wet 'n' Wild is busy, because it's easy to lose sight of them.

Time *Half to full day.* ***Open*** *Between 9:30–10am daily, closing times vary from 5–9pm.* ***Adm*** *US$48, US$42 children aged 3–9, under 3s free, afternoon discount sessions available from 2–5pm depending on the closing time (Wet 'n' Wild is part of the Orlando FlexTicket deal see p. 68).* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Historic Gardens

Historic Bok Sanctuary

AGE 3 & UP

1151 Tower Boulevard, Lake Wales, 863 676 1408, www.boksanctuary.org.

Head for Historic Bok Sanctuary to the south of Orlando if you have small children and want to escape full-on central Florida for a few hours. Following his grandmother's credo to make the world 'a bit more beautiful because you lived in it', author Edward W. Bok created this beautiful, landscaped sanctuary filled with trees, flowers, wild birds and butterflies, which he dedicated to the American people in 1929. Most beautiful of all is a 205-foot Art Deco carillon tower made from pink marble and coquina stone (a soft limestone made up of shell fragments), which forms the focal point of the gardens and houses 60 bells – the largest weighing 12 tons – whose recitals chime out daily at 1pm and 3pm. You can't go in the tower, but you can spend time wandering around the sanctuary's beautiful trails and gardens. A number of activities have been created to

keep children entertained; pick up the free booklet at the visitor centre located at the entrance to the sanctuary. Make sure your children stand on the human sundial and let their shadow tell the time. No food or drink is allowed into the main gardens but there's a family-friendly garden and lovely picnic area just off the car park.

Time *1–1½ hr.* ***Open*** *8am–6pm daily, last admission 5pm.* ***Adm*** *US$10, US$3 children aged 5–12, under 5s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Families wanting to explore the great outdoors in central Florida can pick up a copy of the Celebrate Nature leaflet from Central Florida's Visitor Center (see p. 92), which is crammed with information on the region's parks, nature centres and trails.

Child-Friendly Tours

Boggy Creek Airboat Rides AGE 3 & UP

2001 East Southport Road, and 3702 Big Bass Road, Kissimmee, 407 344 9550, ***www.bcairboats.com****.*

It's easy to forget when immersed in central Florida's theme parks and highways that the flat wetland landscape, known generically as the Everglades, starts just a few miles south of Orlando. Boggy Creek Airboat Tours are a safe and educational way to introduce your children to this peaceful landscape teeming with native wildlife including eagles, ospreys, turtles and, of course, alligators. No reservations are required for the half-hour airboat tours that run at 30-minute intervals throughout the day from both Kissimmee locations

Escape from the bustle of Florida for a few hours and head to the Historic Bok Sanctuary

(the locations are wheelchair accessible, but the boats are not). From there you will be whizzed at speed into the swampy landscape, which, just like the horizons, seems to stretch on forever. Prior reservations are required for the popular 60-minute night-time tours, which are a wonderful way to discover the other side of Florida.

Time *30 min.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily (weather permitting).* ***Adm*** *Tickets 30 min. tours US$26, US$20 children aged 3–12, under 3s free. Night tours US$50, US$46 children aged 3-10. Discount tickets can be printed from their website listed above.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.*

For Active Families

Bill Frederick Park at Turkey Lake

3401 South Hiawassee Road, 407 299 5581.

Located next to the Florida Turnpike north of Universal, Turkey Lake Park is Orlando's largest park, where children can let off steam and enjoy the outdoors without parents having to drive too far from the main attractions. There's plenty to do in this attractive park, which is also a popular camp site, including swimming, hiking and picnicking, and the large playground is terrific for small children.

Open *Nov–Mar 8am–5pm, Apr–Oct 8am–7pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$4 per car.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

The Ice Factory (2221 Partin Settlement Road, Kissimmee, *407 933 4259*, ***www.icefactory.com***) is a large indoor ice skating rink near Walt Disney World, which offers daily inexpensive public skating sessions – skate rental available.

West Orange Trail

County Line Station: From Orlando take SR-50 past Winter Garden, this access station is on the right after the Florida Turnpike.

Winter Garden: From Orlando take SR-50 west to 9th Street in Winter Garden, turn right (north) to CR-43 (Plant Street), then head left (west) to the station.

Running along the south-eastern shore of Lake Apopka to the west of Orlando is the 19-mile-long, paved West Orange Trail. Hire bikes to explore the trail at its western end from **Bikes & Blades** (17914 State Road 438, Winter Garden, *407 877 0600,* ***www.orlandobikerental.com***), for US$6 per hour or US$30 a day. Bikes & Blades also organises a number of cycling tours along the West Orange Trail and around the historic area of downtown Orlando. If you want to explore on your own, the company delivers rented bikes to your hotel along with a free rack to transport them on your car.

INSIDER TIP

Guests at Walt Disney World can hire bikes from a number of their resorts. Bikes cost US$10 per hour and US$25 per day to hire

Days Out in Central Florida

Those wishing to explore off-the-beaten-track central Florida can choose from a number of charming communities, natural wonders and cultural attractions all of which make for great family days out from the Orlando area. West of Kissimmee off Hwy-192 lies Celebration, a small pseudo-Utopian community founded in 1994, which has all the feel of small-town southern America in the 1930s. The town is the result of Disney-led research into how to create the ideal community and there's plenty of quaint shopping to be had downtown, or simply stroll around its white picket fence lined streets. Northwest of Orlando lies Lake County, a rural area packed with hidden gems including Mount Dora, a pretty town nestled on the banks of Lake Dora. Here you can hop aboard a trolley ride through the town and its history, or take a boat tour onto the lake. For a taste of the outdoors, spend a day at Wekiwa Springs State Park north of Orlando where you can snorkel in clear spring-fed waters, hike through miles of wilderness trails, or rent a canoe and paddle along the Wekiva river. Closer to Orlando, Maitland is known for its first-class arts centre (231 West Packwood Avenue, open 9am–5:30pm Tues–Sat, noon–5:30pm Sun, *407 539 2181*, ***www.maitlandartcenter.org***), which is housed in a beautiful historic building, surrounded by gardens and tranquil courtyards.

(no extra cost for a child's seat) and can be used to explore the roads and trails of Walt Disney World.

Shopping

The shopaholic will be in heaven in central Florida as there is plenty of choice and bargains to be bagged. A number of large malls are dotted around the outskirts of Orlando, of which the **Florida Mall** on Sand Lake Road close to Orlando's International Airport is the largest. The mall, open 10am to 9pm Monday to Saturday, noon to 6pm Sunday, has famous shops, large department stores including Sears and Macy's and plenty of teen and children's fashion shops.

Those seeking designer brands such as Gucci, Levi's and Dior, should head for **Orlando Premium Outlets** outdoor shopping mall on Vineland Avenue, open 10am to 11pm Monday to Saturday, 10am to 9pm Sunday – the last stop south on the **I-Ride Trolley** (see p. 101). At the north end of International Drive is the **Festival Bay Mall** open 10am to 9pm Monday to Saturday, 11am to 7pm Sunday. Although at the time of writing there were many empty units in this mall, it remains a good place to bring teenagers, as it contains a large branch of Ron Jon's Surf Shop and the terrific Vans Skatepark

(open daily 10am–10pm, US$15 board rental, US$5 safety gear rental, www.vans.com).

Anyone staying in a holiday villa around SR-27 looking to shop but avoid traffic can head to the **Eagle Ridge Mall** in Lake Wales, which features an antique carousel, a 12-screen cinema and around 90 shops (open 10am–9pm Mon–Sat, noon–6pm Sun).

For families in search of tacky souvenirs, a cruise along Hwy-192 is a must. Here you'll find enormous, often themed, souvenir factory outlets, such as Orange World located inside the world's largest orange, where prices (and quality) are a fraction of those in the theme parks' shops and worth a wander around for the experience alone.

INSIDER TIP

If you need new memory cards or batteries for your digital camera, ignore the large photography factory outlets along Hwy-192 and the I-Drive and head for cheaper chain stores like Circuit City, Best Buy or Radio Shack, located in the malls.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

With Orlando boasting over 5,000 places to eat, there's an overwhelming choice of dining options. Both **Downtown Disney** (see p. 65) and **Universal's CityWalk** (see p. 73) are home to a large range of themed restaurants. However, if you want to get away from the bustle, International Drive has a selection of family-friendly dining options.

Hwy-192 features chain restaurants and all-you-can-eat buffets, while Restaurant Row is handy for Lake Buena Vista at the junction of Sand Lake Road and Dr Phillips Boulevard west of I-4. This stretch of highway features around 20 upmarket restaurants within a mile. Look out for restaurant discount vouchers in the visitor information centres (see p. 20).

See map p. 90 for some of the restaurants listed below.

International Drive

MODERATE

Bahama Breeze ★

8849 International Drive, 407 248 2499, www.bahamabreeze.com.

Bahama Breeze is one of America's better chain restaurants and hugely popular with families – make sure you book for dinner. A dark wood decor adds warmth to the laid-back atmosphere but it's the excellent Caribbean-influenced food that people flock here for. I especially like the large range of tropical drinks and selection of non-alcoholic options on the children's menu. The menu features a varied selection of inexpensive soups, salads and sandwiches and plenty of Caribbean dishes such as West Indies patties, Margarita chicken and superb Coconut shrimp. There's also a branch of Bahama Breeze at 8735 Vineland Avenue, Lake Buena Vista, *407 938 9010*.

Dinner Shows

A prominent feature of Orlando's evening entertainment is its multitude of dinner shows. From the spirit of Polynesian to murder mystery, there are plenty of themes to choose from, and audience participation is an essential feature of all of them. Tickets cost around US$60 adults and US$35. children, and families should expect good entertainment rather than fine dining. The most popular show is Disney's **Hoop de Doo Review** ★★ (*407 939 3463*, ***www.disneyworld.com*** – book well in advance) held at Fort Wilderness Campground. This vaudeville-style show was described by a Disney employee as being 'so bad it's good' – even the strawberry shortcake dessert is a production number in its own right.

Of the remaining shows, those involving horses are popular with children. **Medieval Times** (4510 Hwy-192, *1 888 935 6878*, ***www.medievaltimes.com***) transports audiences back to the age of chivalry and jousting, **Arabian Nights** (6225 Hwy-192, *407 239 9223*, ***www.arabian-nights.com***) is performed inside the world's largest indoor equestrian ring and stars 60 handsome horses. And set aboard a huge fully rigged replica galleon, the **Pirates Dinner Adventure** (6400 Carrier Drive, *407 248 0590*, ***www.orlandopirates.com***) is a swashbuckling extravaganza filled with acrobatics, wicked pirates, beautiful princesses and, of course, treasure.

If you want to know what you're letting yourself in for before buying tickets, there are plenty of clips of Orlando's dinner shows on ***www.youtube.com***.

Open *11am–1am Sun–Thurs, 11am–1:30am Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$11–US$23.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Café Tu Tu Tango ★★

8625 International Drive, 407 248 2222, ***www.cafetututango.com/orlando****.*

Café Tu Tu Tango is a casual and eclectic eatery styled around a bohemian Spanish artists' loft and is a good choice for families who want to experience something a bit different in terms of atmosphere. The imaginative interior is decorated by the work of local artists and the Mediterranean and Latin American influenced food, full of strong flavours and served tapas style, is meant to be shared. The less imaginative children's menu features spaghetti and pizza options but young diners can always eat tapas too, and everyone can enjoy regular entertainment, which features acrobats, magicians and live music.

Open *11:30am–11pm Sun–Thurs, 11:30am–1am Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$7–US$20.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Cricketer's Arms Pub

5250 International Drive at Festival Bay Mall, 407 354 0686, www.cricketersarmspub.com.

With all the ambience of a British local, this pub in the middle of Orlando is the place to head if you're pining for inexpensive British pub grub. Wooden beams, a large fireplace and TV screen showing all the latest footie and rugby matches add to the atmosphere and the array of imported British beer and ales features the likes of London Pride, Fullers' ESB and Old Speckled Hen on tap. Just like pubs at home, this is a family-friendly eatery and the children's menu includes fish, bangers or chicken and chips.

Open** 11am–2am daily. **Main Courses** US$8–US$17. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

Ming Court ★

9188 International Drive, 407 351 9988, www.ming-court.com.

One of the most distinctive restaurants in town, Ming Court is styled after the architecture of the Ming Dynasty and stands amidst lush gardens. The food is as memorable as the colourful surrounds and menus feature imaginative East Asian cuisine and are strong on seafood, chicken and vegetarian dishes – some with a local slant such as the Florida orange beef lunch. The children's menu includes a mix of East Asian and Western food and comes complete with the story of the Legend of Ming Dragon. Live Oriental folk music plays throughout the night and make sure you leave room for one of the amazing desserts.

Open** 11am–3pm & 4:30–11pm daily. **Main Courses** US$7–US$20. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

Out of Town

EXPENSIVE

Chalet Suzanne ★★

3800 Chalet Suzanne Drive, Lake Wales, 863 676 6011, www.chaletsuzanne.com.

Set in a pink fairytale, Swiss-style building, crammed with antiques from around the world, Chalet Suzanne is one of central Florida's top restaurants. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the gourmet food is well worth the half-hour's drive from Orlando to experience – their soup has nourished NASA astronauts when in space – and children love to watch small planes fly in and out of the tiny airstrip. Although the dining room at Chalet Suzanne can be on the formal side in the evening, there's plenty of garden space for children to play in. However, this is also my favourite romantic restaurant in this region and perfect for a special parents-only night out. Chalet Suzanne is also a quirky place to stay (rates US$129–US$229) and features a lovely lake in its grounds, which all ages enjoy exploring.

Open** 10am–2pm & 5–8pm Tues–Sun, dinner served until 9am Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** Breakfast US$18, lunch US$17–US$42, dinner US$28–US$42. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

Garfield's restaurant and pub at the Eagle Ride shopping mall on SR-27 at Lake Wales, runs special meal-and-movie deals with the multiplex cinema in the same mall. If you're staying in a villa around this area, this is a good option for a family night out without having to drive into the busy tourist areas.

For more information on family-friendly dining in the central Florida region, see the Family-Friendly Dining section of the Major Attractions chapter on p. 82.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

Most of central Florida's accommodation options are geared up for families, but from basic chain motels to luxury resorts, there's an incredible amount of choice and price ranges, and finding the right option to suit your needs and budget can be confusing. The best way to start is by working out what you want to do here and if you'll be hiring a car. Then search for accommodation options in the area that's convenient for you, bearing in mind that many hotels offer free transport to Disney, Universal and SeaWorld.

One area recommended if you don't want to drive is the tree-lined section of International Drive between the Orange County Convention Center and Sand Lake Road. This area is convenient for Universal Orlando, and many sights and restaurants are within walking distance. You can use the **I-Ride Trolley** (see p. 101) for those that are not.

Families on a budget wanting to be close to Disney often choose to stay on Hwy-192, which is far less tacky than it used to be, but it is advisable to stick with the reputable chains when picking a resort or motel in this area. Lake Buena Vista, to the north of I-4 and Walt Disney World, is home to a number of Disney-affiliated hotels (see p. 85) and is one of the quieter tourist areas that's still convenient for most parks.

See map p. 90 for some of the accommodation listings below.

INSIDER TIP

There are plenty of useful websites for researching accommodation in the Orlando area. Try ***www.orlandohotels.com***, ***www.orlandoescape.com*** or ***www.orlandovacationhotels.com***.

International Drive Area

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn ★ GREEN

*14500 Continental Gateway, 866 462 6425, **www.nickhotel.com**.*

Families staying here won't have any problem persuading their children that a day at the hotel swimming pool is a good alternative to going to a theme park. This resort's large pool areas feature an interactive water tower

complete with huge water slides, sandy play area and whirlpool tubs. Families stay in two- or three-bedroom suites themed after cartoon characters like SpongeBob Square Pants and fitted with full kitchens and family areas. I like this resort because children are its main focus, there's even a Sparkle Kids Spa where children can have manicures, hair wraps and temporary tattoos, and every night the resort's Nick Studio hosts family-friendly entertainment. A range of onsite eating options includes a food court, and children eat free with paying adults at all of the hotel's restaurants. Alternatively, evening childcare is available if parents want a night out alone.

Rooms *777.* ***Rates*** *US$140–US$518.* ***Credit*** *AE, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In Room***

MODERATE

Doubletree Castle Hotel ★★

8629 International Drive, 407 345 1511, ***www.doubletreecastle.com****.*

If your children don't want the fairy tale to end when they leave the theme parks, then this large resort styled after a European medieval castle is the place to stay. Lavish purple dominates the themed decor and I particularly love the gold throne-like chairs in the opulent dining room and romantic roof-top bar nestled amongst fake turrets. The large swimming pool is one of the best features of this hotel, which offers families luxury minus a high price tag. Its recently renovated spacious rooms sleep up to four and young guests are given free cookies on arrival. The hotel is located in a pleasant area of International Drive and a number of restaurants, including Cafe Tu Tu Tango (see p. 107), are right on its doorstep.

Rooms *216.* ***Rates*** *US$110– US$210.* ***Credit*** *AE, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

INSIDER TIP

Guests at the Orlando Metropolitan Resort, 8444 International Drive (***www.orlandometropolitanresort.com***) are allowed free use of the YMCA aquatic centre next door, which includes two large pools and a diving well.

BUDGET

Quality Inn Plaza ★ VALUE

9000 International Drive, 407 996 8585, ***http://qualityinn-orlando.com****.*

This large motel-style hotel claims a top spot on International Drive and is the best family budget option in this area. The rooms are basic but comfortable and well equipped, and the pool and playground areas in the hotel grounds are good fun and well maintained. The onsite amenities include a reasonably priced buffet-style, children-eat-free, restaurant and 24-hour store, and a good range of restaurants lie only a short walk away. The Pointe Orlando shopping and entertainment complex on the opposite side of International Drive is home to a large cinema, which includes a giant IMAX screen.

Rooms *1,020.* ***Rates*** *US$55–US$110.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Hwy-192

BUDGET

Comfort Suites Maingate Resort

2775 Florida Plaza Boulevard, Kissimmee, 407 397 7848, ***www.comfortsuitesfl.com****.*

With Walt Disney World only 2 miles down the road, Comfort Suites Maingate is one of the better-value resorts within easy travelling distance of the big theme parks. I like it as a family choice because it's set back off the busy Hwy-192 and the spacious one- and two- bedroom suites are tastefully decorated, not themed. The pool area is large and well set up to keep children entertained while adults sunbathe, and Old Town (see p. 98), with its restaurants and shops, is right next door.

Rooms *198.* ***Rates*** *US$90–US$120.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Lake Buena Vista

MODERATE

Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort

★ GREEN

13351 SR-535, Lake Buena Vista, 407 239 4500, ***www.hisunspreelbv.com****.*

Families staying at this friendly hotel, right on Disney's doorstep have the choice of two types of accommodation: basic rooms with two queen-size beds or, if your budget allows, Kidsuites. The latter include separate themed sleeping areas and a kitchenette. There's a range of activities to keep children entertained throughout the day and a small cinema screens free children's films every day plus Dive In Movies on Saturdays. There's no onsite evening childcare, but there is a range of family-friendly entertainment and children under 12 eat free with a paying adult in the resort's restaurant.

Rooms *507.* ***Rates*** *Rooms from US$110, suites from US$159.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Villas

A number of families choose to rent villas in the Orlando area rather than stay in hotels. This can work out much cheaper if you self-cater but it can be harder to meet other families and for your children to make friends. The **Central Florida Visitor Information Center's** website, ***www.visitcentralflorida.org*** (see p. 92), has details of a range of villa-hire companies, of which **AAA SunState Management** is recommended (*352 242 0351*, ***www.sunstate-rentals.com***).

Westgate Dude Ranch Rodeo

Out of Town

MODERATE

Westgate Dude Ranch ★★

3200 River Ranch Boulevard, River Ranch, Near Lake Wales, 863 692 0727, www.wgriveranch.com.

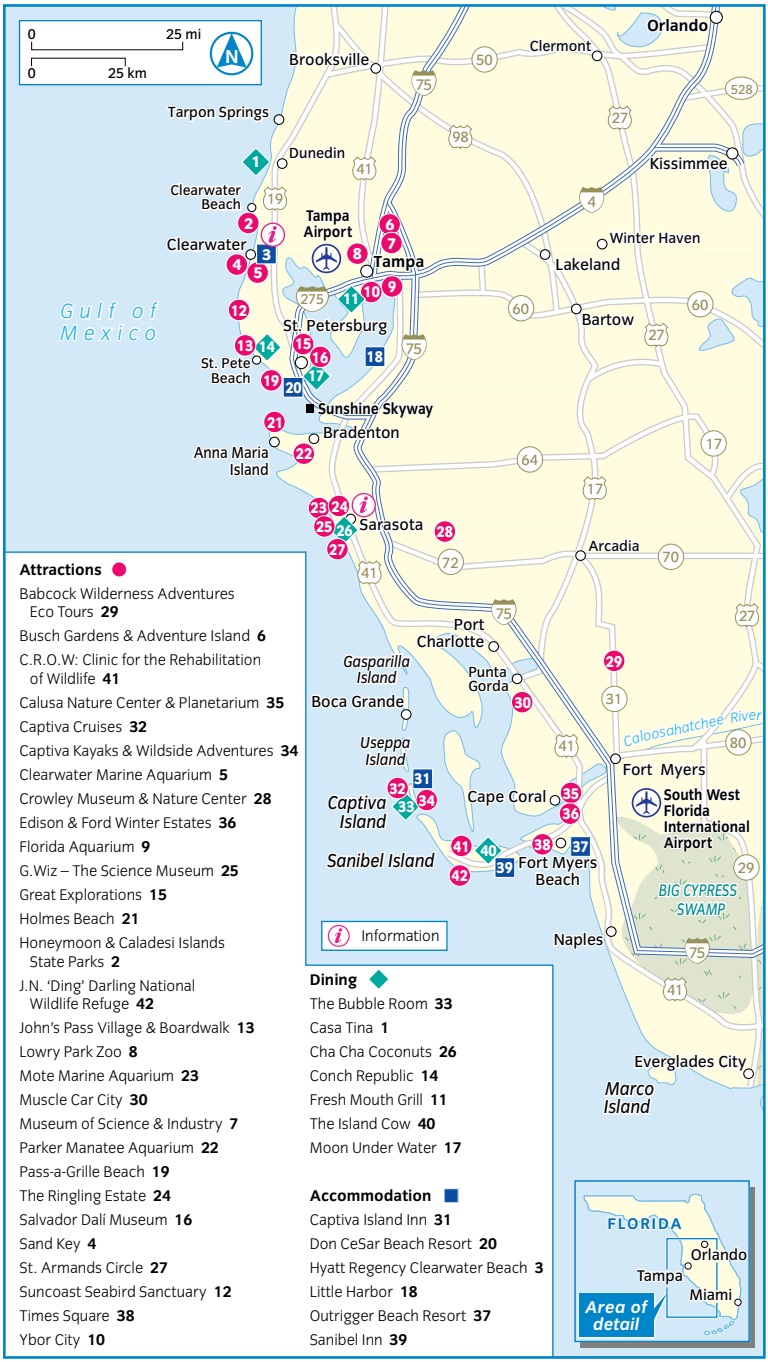
An hour's drive but a million miles away from Orlando, Westgate Dude Ranch is an authentic American family experience that's not to be missed by families who want to get back to nature and enjoy the outdoors. There are three types of accommodation, from basic rooms to suites, all of which have cooking facilities and can sleep up to four. The family-focused activities on offer, such as hayrides, country cookouts, barrel racing and pony riding, are ones you just won't find at the tourist resorts, and visitors can also hire bikes and canoes, go on airboat rides and explore nature trails. Evening entertainment includes movie nights for children at the Kiddie Corral and karaoke and line dancing at the saloon. An absolute must is the Saturday night rodeo, where the patriotism takes some getting used to for a British audience, but the skill of the riders will wow all ages – expect your daughters to fall in love with the cowboys and your sons to want to be one.

***Rooms** 100. **Rates** Rooms US$90–US$140, one-bedroomed cottages US$159–US$179, two-bedroomed cottages US$279–US$299. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** **In room** A/C*

Also see accommodation options at the major attractions in central Florida on p. 85.

5 Tampa Bay & the Southwest Coast

TAMPA BAY & THE SOUTHWEST COAST



Attractions

Babcock Wilderness Adventures Eco Tours **29**
Busch Gardens & Adventure Island **6**
C.R.O.W: Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife **41**
Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium **35**
Captiva Cruises **32**
Captiva Kayaks & Wildside Adventures **34**
Clearwater Marine Aquarium **5**
Crowley Museum & Nature Center **28**
Edison & Ford Winter Estates **36**
Florida Aquarium **9**
G.Wiz – The Science Museum **25**
Great Explorations **15**
Holmes Beach **21**
Honeymoon & Caladesi Islands State Parks **2**
J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge **42**
John's Pass Village & Boardwalk **13**
Lowry Park Zoo **8**
Mote Marine Aquarium **23**
Muscle Car City **30**
Museum of Science & Industry **7**
Parker Manatee Aquarium **22**
Pass-a-Grille Beach **19**
The Ringling Estate **24**
Salvador Dalí Museum **16**
Sand Key **4**
St. Armands Circle **27**
Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary **12**
Times Square **38**
Ybor City **10**

Dining

The Bubble Room **33**
Casa Tina **1**
Cha Cha Coconuts **26**
Conch Republic **14**
Fresh Mouth Grill **11**
The Island Cow **40**
Moon Under Water **17**

Accommodation

Captiva Island Inn **31**
Don CeSar Beach Resort **20**
Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach **3**
Little Harbor **18**
Outrigger Beach Resort **37**
Sanibel Inn **39**

Fringed by the Big Bend's coastal wetlands to the north and the subtropical wilderness of the Everglades to the south, the long stretch of glorious beaches this region is famous for has been attracting holidaying families for decades. This part of Florida is made up of two distinct areas. The central area, which contains the cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg, beaches from Honeymoon Island to Fort de Soto and a large natural harbour, is known generically as Tampa Bay. Few families stay in the cities in this area, choosing instead to make the beaches the focus of their time in the region and travel into urban centres on day trips. Many British families wanting to combine lazing around in the sun with theme park thrills, spilt their time in Florida between the Orlando area and the Tampa Bay beaches, which claim an average of 361 days of sunshine a year. South of Tampa Bay, from Bradenton to Marco Island, is the southwest coast, which is popular with those venturing away from the main tourist regions and has much to offer visitors who want a more authentic experience of the Sunshine State yet still enjoy family-friendly laid back beaches. All the sands in this region are lapped by the Gulf of Mexico's warm waters and while some are known for their water sports, paragliding, pirate cruises and beach bars, others are equally celebrated for their remoteness. Far removed from its beaches, the cities of southwest Florida such as Fort Myers are rich in history, culture and child-friendly attractions and are magnets for families seeking to combine museums, art galleries and aquariums with time on the beach.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

Tampa's Visitor Information Center is located in the Channel-side Entertainment complex near the cruise ship port and Florida Aquarium at 615 Channelside Drive (*813 223 2752*, ***www.visittampabay.com***, open 9:30am–5:30pm Mon–Sat, 11am–5pm Sun).

For information on St. Petersburg and Clearwater, visit the booth at Clearwater's Pier 60, see p. 125 (*727 726 1547*, ***www.beachchamber.com***, open 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun). In St. Petersburg visit the information booth on St. Pete's Pier, see p. 118 (*727 821 6164,* ***www.visitstpeteclearwater.com***, open 10am–9pm Mon–Thurs, 10am–10pm Sat, 11am–9pm Sun).

Sarasota's Visitor Bureau is located on Hwy-41 north of the junction to St. Armands Circle (*941 957 1877*, ***www.sarasotafl.org***, open 10am–4pm Mon–Sat, noon–3pm Sun).

The Greater Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce is located at 17200 San Carlos Blvd (*239 454 7500*, open 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 11am–5pm Sun) and is crammed with useful tourist

information. There is also an information point downtown at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates (see p. 131). The visitor center for the islands of Sanibel and Captiva is located on Sanibel by the causeway from the mainland (*239 472 1080*, open 9am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun). The official website for this region is ***www.fortmyerssanibel.com*** and *01273 832 832* is the UK telephone number to call for more information.

Orientation

Various roads, including I-275, SR-60 and SR-580, link Tampa with the beaches of Tampa Bay. Alt-19 is the quickest route through the beach communities, while the slower SR-699 travels the length of St. Pete's beaches along the coast. I-75 is the fastest way to travel through southwest Florida, with Hwy-41 – also known as the Tamiami Trail – running parallel to the interstate.

Arriving

By Plane Located 5 miles west of downtown, Tampa Airport (*813 870 8770*, ***www.tampaairport.com***) is the region's main airport. British Airways operates a regular service from London Gatwick and Delta runs a service with one stop from London Heathrow. And numerous American airlines schedule internal flights from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Fort Myers, Key West, Pensacola and Tallahassee.

Serving the south of the region, the Southwest Florida International Airport (*239 768 1000, **www.flylcpa.com***) is 3 miles east of I-75 near Fort Myers and welcomes internal flights from Miami, Orlando and Key West.

For details of package tours, see p. 29.

By Car Tampa is approximately 85 miles southwest of Orlando. The I-4 connects the two cities and ends in Tampa at I-275, which then continues across the north of Tampa Bay to St. Petersburg. Once over the bay, join SR-688 to the beaches. If you want to avoid Tampa Bay on your journey south, leave I-4 at its junction with I-75 east of Tampa.

Hwy-17, which joins I-75 at Punta Gorda, is a more direct route from Orlando to Fort Myers.

By Train At the time of writing, a new high-speed rail service that will connect downtown Tampa with Orlando is scheduled to open in 2015. See p. 35 for full details.

By Ferry The Key West Express ferry travels between Fort Myers Beach and Key West. High-speed boats leave at 8:30am from Fort Myers Beach and take approximately 3.5 hours to travel the 120 miles to Key West, from where they depart for the return journey to Fort Myers Beach at 6pm. Singles cost US$85; round trips US$154. Children aged 6 to 12 will pay US$56 single, US$75

round trip; under 5s with a fee-paying adult only pay port fees. For further information *1 888 539 2628*, ***www.seakeywestexpress.com***. Key West Express also run a direct ferry service between Marco Island and Key West (see website for details) and Key West to Miami; see p. 217 for details.

INSIDER TIP
The ferry journey between Fort Myers Beach and Key West is long, and although family-friendly films are screened, if you're travelling with young ones, bring activities to keep them entertained.

INSIDER TIP
Ginger is a natural remedy for seasickness.

GETTING AROUND

By Car

With limited public transport options, the only feasible way to travel around Tampa Bay and the southwest coast with children is by car. For details of car hire, see p. 31.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Children's Top 10 Attractions

1. **Discovering** the waters around Captiva Island with Captiva Kayak and Wildside Adventures; p. 136.
2. **Seeing** circus history come to life at the Ringling Estate; p. 133.
3. **Learning** about Florida's aquatic environments at Tampa's Florida Aquarium; p. 134.
4. **Getting** up close and personal with nature at the J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge; p. 136.
5. **Kite flying** on Honeymoon Island; p. 125.
6. **Viewing** surrealist masterpieces at the Salvador Dalí Museum; p. 134.
7. **Searching** the shores of Sanibel for shells; p. 138.
8. **Witnessing** 'nature unscripted' on a Babcock Wilderness Adventure; p. 135.
9. **Driving** over the breathtaking Sunshine Skyway; p. 118.
10. **Dolphin spotting** from the end of St. Petersburg's pier; p. 118.

Child-Friendly Events

American Sandsculpting Championship Festival

*239 454 7500, **www.sandfestival.com**. Check website for exact dates each year.*

Every November, artists from all over North America gather on Fort Myers Beach between the Outrigger (see p. 145) and Holiday Inn resorts to create amazing artwork out of sand. The creations could be anything from intricate castles to people and animals. If you're inspired by the master sculptures, test your own skills by entering the amateur contest. The event attracts

The Sunshine Skyway

Crossing the south of Tampa Bay and linking St. Petersburg with the rest of the southwest coast, the Sunshine Skyway (toll US$1), built by the American Bridge Company, is one of the world's most spectacular bridges. Opening to traffic in 1987, the bridge is 5.5 miles long and provides panoramic views of Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The rest stops stationed at either end of the bridge are memorable places to take a break.

thousands of visitors who come to watch the artists at work and chill out in the SandVendor Village, filled with food and craft stalls.

Adm *Free.*

Cinco de Mayo Fiesta

722 734 9226.

Each 5th May, in recognition of the Mexican celebration Cinco de Mayo, Casa Tina's a Mexican restaurant in Dunedin (see p. 139) throws a street party. The festivities, which run from 5 to 11pm, take place on Main Street outside the restaurant and include live music, dance lessons, costume and dance contests, and plenty of Mexican food and drink.

Adm *Free.*

Towns & Cities

INSIDER TIP

The best way to reach downtown St. Petersburg from the coast is via 107th Avenue. Also known as Treasure Island Causeway and Central Avenue, this long straight road links Treasure Island Beach directly with the centre of town.

St. Petersburg ★

Nicknamed 'the Sunshine City', St. Petersburg is characterised by an appealing downtown, tree-lined waterfront and laid-back pace of life. It's easy to spend a whole day here soaking up good shopping, lively pavement cafés and a host of family-friendly cultural and outdoors attractions, along with, as the nickname suggests, almost perpetual sunshine.

Most families make a beeline for **St. Pete's famous pier** ★ ALL AGES (800 2nd Avenue, *727 821 6443*, ***www.stpetepier.com***, open 10am–8pm Mon–Thurs, 10am–9pm Fri & Sat, 11am–7pm Sun, free). Formerly a railroad pier, this distinctive landmark stretches a mile into Tampa Bay and ends with a large, geomantic, five-storey building filled with gift shops, places to eat and a small aquarium. Public parking (US$3 per day) is available near the top of the pier, or hop aboard the colourful train that regularly trundles its length if you've parked downtown. Dolphin-spotting cruises depart from the end of the pier throughout the

day (*727 647 1538, www.pierdolphincruises.net*, US$22, US$14 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 1–2 hours) and are a good way to introduce children to these playful marine animals in their natural habitat – although I've spotted them from the pier's observation desk. And land-loving families can hire bikes here for around US$10 per hour from Wheel Fun Rentals (*727 820 0375, www.wheelfunrentals.com*) and explore the waterfront and downtown via pedal power.

A large landscaped and shady waterfront park lies at the foot of the pier and here you'll find a couple of St. Petersburg's fine museums (see box p. 119). However, the city's best cultural attraction is the world-class Salvador Dalí Museum, to the south of downtown (see p. 134).

St. Petersburg's Museums

For a small city, St. Petersburg contains a large and varied selection of museums, all of which are within the downtown area. Listed here are some highlights:

The child-friendly **Florida International Museum** AGE 6 & UP (244 2nd Avenue North, *727 341 7900, www.spcollege.edu/fimuseum*, open 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun, US$12, US$5 children aged 7–11, under 7s free, time 1 hour) hosts a glittering selection of national and international travelling exhibitions – call ahead to see what's on.

Learning is made fun at **Great Explorations** AGE 3 & UP (1925 4th Street North, *727 821 8992, www.greatex.org*, open 10am–4:30pm Mon–Sat, noon–4:30pm Sun, US$9, time 1½ hour), a hands-on children's museum crammed with interactive exhibits dedicated to science, nutrition, industry and fun, and located next door to St. Petersburg's lush sunken gardens.

The Museum of Fine Arts AGE 13 & UP (255 Beach Drive NE, *727 896 2667, www.fine-arts.org*, open 10am–5pm Tues–Sat, 1–5pm Sun, US$16 adults, US$10 ages 7–18, under 7s free, time 1 hour) is housed in a replica Mediterranean villa and home to 4,000 objects including work by Monet, Cézanne and O'Keeffe – don't miss the exceptional photography collections.

Florida Holocaust Museum AGE 10 & UP (55 5th Street South, *727 820 0100, www.flholocaustmuseum.org*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$14 adults, US$8 under 18s, time 1 hour) contains moving displays, including a box car from the Polish death camps, that educate and inform visitors on the history of the Holocaust whilst also promoting tolerance today. This museum is not recommended for children under 10 and all children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult.

FUN FACT Haunted Bookshop

Haslam's on Central Avenue, St. Petersburg (*www.haslams.com*) opened in 1933 and today is Florida's largest bookshop. It's a pleasure to browse through its endless shelves – but you might not want to do so alone, as the shop is reputed to be haunted.

St. Petersburg also offers good shopping and bang in the middle of its downtown, on the corner of 1st Avenue North and 2nd Street North, is Baywalk, an open-air complex of shops, cafés and restaurants, plus a multi-screen cinema.

However, far removed from all the museums and city life, and rarely discovered by most visitors, is **Boyd Hill Nature Preserve** ★ FIND (1101 Country Club Way South, *727 893 7720, www.stpete.org/boyd*, open 10am–7pm Tues–Fri, 7am–6pm Sat, 10am–6pm Sun, US$3, US$1.50 children aged 3–16, under 3s free). This rambling 245-acre park, sprawled along the banks of the Lake Maggiore to the southwest of downtown St. Petersburg, is home to an abundance of wildlife and a network of trails from which to explore it all. To reach Boyd Hill by car, leave I-275 at exit 17 and turn east onto 54th Avenue South, then left onto Dr Martin Luther King, Jr Street South. Country Club Way South is four blocks on the left.

Tampa

With the arrival of the railway in the 1880s and the dredging of its harbour to accommodate large ships, Tampa's status rapidly developed from fishing village into the commercial heart of southwest Florida. Today the city sprawls along the banks of the Hillsborough river as it flows into Tampa Bay and its downtown skyscrapers dominate the bay's skyline.

Most visitors fail to venture farther than Busch Gardens (see p. 78) or its seasonal adjacent water park **Adventure Island** (*www.adventureisland.com*). However, Tampa's other family-friendly attractions are some of the best in the region and if your children are not ready for the beach, the sights are worth navigating the city's confusing road system to explore.

Tampa's most fascinating and tourist-friendly area is the Cuban district of Ybor City. In 1886, Don Vincente Martinez Ybor moved his cigar-making business from Key West to Tampa, attracting a migrant workforce of around 20,000 to the region.

FUN FACT Lightning Capital

Tampa Bay is known as the lightning capital of the US and afternoon thunderstorms are common during the summer.

Despite the decline in the cigar industry, Ybor maintains its vibrancy and many of its old cigar factories and workers' cottages have been transformed into pavement cafés and trendy shops.

INSIDER TIP

Tampa's big-city status comes along with big-city problems, so stick to the major roads when driving around and don't be tempted to take short cuts.

Ybor's small, historic grid of streets is cluttered with red-brick Victorian buildings and Cuban-influenced architecture, some decorated with colourful murals. Centro Ybor, a dining and shopping complex with a streetcar stop (see above) outside, stands at its heart and is a good starting point from which to explore. Ybor is easily covered on foot and walking tours can be picked up from the **Visitor Information Center** on East 8th Ave (*813 241 8838*, *www.ybor.org*) where you can also watch a film on Ybor's history and pick up discount tokens to attractions, including a museum and restored cigar worker's house. Best of all are the old Cuban cafés, where the coffee is fabulous and you can watch cigars being hand rolled. Teenagers who enjoy poking around retro second-hand clothes stores will love Ybor, but there isn't much here to hold the attention of younger children.

INSIDER TIP

If you want to visit Ybor City and the Florida Aquarium, you can park at either and catch the streetcar (*www.tescolinestreetcar.org*) a vintage trolley service connecting the two. One-way trips cost US$2.50 and day passes US$5. You'll need exact change if you buy tickets on board, or passes can be purchased from the Visitor Information Center near the Aquarium (see p. 115).

Tarpon Springs OVERRATED

www.spongedocks.net.

Known as the Sponge Capital of the World, the small town of Tarpon Springs, 30 miles north of St. Petersburg, attracted an influx of Greek immigrants in the early 20th century, who came to harvest the natural sponges growing in the surrounding waters. It's their influence on the town, and its working harbour, which attracts droves of tourists who come to stroll along Dodecanese Boulevard, the town's waterfront, stuffed with souvenir shops and Greek restaurants.

The town's **Spongeorama Museum** AGE 6 & UP (510 Dodecanese Boulevard, *www.spongeorama.com*, open 10am–5pm

FUN FACT **That's a Lot!**

There are 5,000 to 10,000 known species of sponge, most of which feed on bacteria and food particles found in water.

Tampa's Family-Friendly Attractions

In addition to Busch Gardens (see p. 78) and the Florida Aquarium (see p. 134), Tampa has two other large family-friendly attractions. Six miles north of downtown, **Lowry Park Zoo** ★ AGE 3 & UP (1101 West Sligh Avenue, *813 935 8552, www.lowryparkzoo.com*, open 9:30am–5pm daily, US$21, US$16 children aged 3–11, under 3s free, time 2–3 hours) offers various landscaped areas featuring native and foreign species. Primate World, with its collection of monkeys, orangutans, chimpanzees and baboons, is entertaining and educational and children can feed animals and interact with kangaroos and wallabies at Wallaroo Station. There are some rides and a water playground for small children (bring bathing suits) and manatee lovers can view these endangered animals in the Aquatic Center and learn about conservation efforts to protect them. For an extra fee (US$14 adults, US$10 children), you can join a nature cruise along the Hillsborough River and view native wildlife in its natural habitat.

With its three floors housing 450 hands-on displays, the **Museum of Science & Industry** ★★ AGE 3 & UP (4801 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, *813 987 6000, www.mosi.org*, open 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–6pm Sat & Sun, US$26, US$20 children aged 2–12, under 2s free, admission includes an IMAX movie and planetarium show, time 3–4 hours) is one of America's largest science centres. Developed under the guidance of children, the Kids in Charge area targets the under 12s and provides a multitude of opportunities for learning through play. Tour the human body, experience hurricane-force winds, ride on a high-wire bicycle and view an enormous dinosaur skeleton. A giant IMAX cinema screens impressive education-based films throughout the day.

daily, free, time 10 minutes) and **Aquarium** AGE 5 & UP (850 Dodecanese Boulevard, *727 938 5378, www.tarponspringsaquarium.com*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$8, US$6 children aged 3–11, under 3s free, time 30 minutes) are both disappointing. However, it's the upbeat nature of the Mediterranean-influenced atmosphere that appeals to children and that visitors flock here to enjoy. Explore away from the main tourist drag, which can be uncharacteristically aggressive for laid-back Florida. A free self-guided walking tour is available from the harbourside visitor centre, or take the trolley that loops around the main sights (US$1 per ride, US$3 for a day pass).

INSIDER TIP

If the intensity of Tarpon Springs' harbour becomes too much, seek refuge in St Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral, a peaceful and beautiful haven from the heat and crowds.

Greek food is a big draw to Tarpon Springs and there are numerous authentic restaurants to choose from, most offering at least one refreshing alternative to burgers and hot dogs on their children's menu. **Hellas** on Dodecanese Boulevard (*727 934 8400, www.hellas-restaurant.com*) specialises in Greek pastries, but popular with locals is **Mama Maria's** on North Pinellas Avenue (Alt-19) (*727 934 5678, www.theoriginalmamamarias.com*). Located away from the main tourist area and looking like little more than a fast-food joint, this restaurant's reasonably priced Greek food is fabulous and still cooked by mama. You can choose to eat in or take away – *spanakopita* from heaven!

Dunedin ★★ FIND

www.delightfuldunedin.com.

It's easy to miss this attractive, friendly, waterfront community tucked away from the region's tourist hot spots and largely ignored by foreign visitors. Families can easily spend half a day exploring the quaint downtown with its arts and crafts orientated shops, cosy cafés and surprising range of good-quality restaurants. Try **Cappuccino's Bakery Cafe** (open 7am Mon–Fri, and 10am Sat until early evening and 1–5pm Sun), for its speciality coffees, smoothies and scrumptious cakes, and the **Children's Art Museum** AGE 3 & UP located inside Dunedin's Fine Art Center (1143 Michigan Boulevard, *727 298 3322, www.dfac.org*, open 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat, 1–4pm Sun, time 30 minutes) where interactive displays help small children understand the artwork on display in the main galleries.

There's no beach at Dunedin, instead at its pleasant waterfront you'll find a small fishing pier, children's park and oceanside walkway. Active families can hire

Tarpon Springs harbour

Dunedin heron in the marina

bikes to explore the Pinellas Trail (see p. 137), which passes through the town.

Dunedin is a town that's proud to party and boasts a packed programme of festivals and events throughout the year, including a lively Mardi Gras parade in February. Check the town's website above for a full events calendar.

INSIDER TIP

Ales brewed at the award-winning Dunedin Brewery can be sampled at the **Snug Pub,** 937 Douglas Ave, open from 4pm Tuesday and Wednesday and from noon Thursday to Sunday until late.

Best Beaches & Beach Communities

Honeymoon & Caladesi Islands State Parks ★★

www.romantichoneymoonisland.com.

Anyone who enjoys kite flying should bring one to Honeymoon Island State Park (open 8am–sunset daily, US$8), a large island

FUN FACT

Highland Fun

Dunedin's sister city is Sterling in Scotland, and each spring the town hosts its own highland games.

FUN FACT **Marry Me?**

Many couples get married on Honeymoon Island.

north of Dunedin where seagulls take food from your hand. The glorious undeveloped seashell-strewn sandy beach is surrounded by mangrove swamps and a pine forest, and is a favourite with local families. There are plenty of activities to keep all ages occupied, including beach volleyball, kayak hire, nature trails, snorkelling, a lively café and Nature Center (open 9am–5pm) filled with information on the island's wildlife and history.

Visitors can spend up to 4 hours on the glorious **Caladesi Island State Park** ★★, one of the last undeveloped barrier islands on the Florida coastline, which lies a 20-minute ferry ride away from **Honeymoon Island** (*727 734 1501*, ***www.caladesiferry.org***, round trip US$12, US$6 children aged 4–12, under 4s free) where the 3-mile beach is fringed with gentle sand dunes leading to mangrove woods. It's considered to be one of the best beaches in North America.

Clearwater & Sand Key

www.visitclearwaterflorida.com.

Dominated by large resorts, surf shops and beach volleyball, Clearwater's wide beach is one of the most developed in southwest Florida and popular with young people and European tourists, making its sands an attractive option for families with older children who are seeking a lively party beach.

INSIDER TIP

The main causeway to Clearwater Beach from the mainland (SR-60) is crammed with traffic during rush hour and at the weekends.

Find a quiet spot on the vast Sand Key beach

Clearwater's marina and Pier 60 form the beach's energetic hub and are situated at the point where the causeway from the mainland joins the coast. Here you'll find public parking (US$1.50 per hour Mon–Fri, US$2 Sat–Sun) and restrooms, and numerous tour operators offering everything from dolphin spotting to pirate cruises and jet skiing to paragliding. Weather permitting, Pier 60 hosts sunset celebrations most evenings from 3:30 to 7:30pm, during which artists, performers and bands gather to entertain visitors and celebrate the setting sun.

South of Clearwater, and far better suited for families with small children, is **Sand Key Park** ★★. Parking is metered (US$1.25 per hour) and plentiful, and even when the beach is busy you'll find a quiet spot on this vast expanse of crystal-white sand. The park also features a large play area, shaded picnic tables, changing facilities and toilets, but you'll need to bring your own food and drink.

INSIDER TIP

The Suncoast Beach Trolley serves the length of the coast from Clearwater to Pass-a-Grille. The route has frequent stops and trolleys run every 20 to 30 minutes from 5am to 10pm Sunday to Monday, until midnight Friday and Saturday. Fares US$1.75 per ride or US$4 for a day pass. Exact change required.

St. Pete's Beaches

Stretching from Belleair Shore in the north to Pass-a-Grille in the

Pirate Ship Cruise, John's Pass

south, this collection of beaches, known generically as St. Pete's Beaches, attract thousands of tourists every year. Each beach varies in character, with some residential and others overdeveloped.

Drive along SR-699 to explore them all; if you're into water sports, aim for Treasure Island, and the best shopping option is **John's Pass** at Madeira Beach (see p. 137). Here, an array of water-based activities is also on offer, including parasailing, dolphin-watching tours and, best of all for children, a **Pirate Ship Cruise** complete with water-gun battles, face painting and treasure hunts (*727 423 7824, www.thepirateshipatjohnspass.com*). Cruises depart 11am, 2pm and sunset Monday to Saturday. US$33, US$23 2 to 20 years old, US$8 under 2s.

By far the loveliest part of this strip is the lively but low-key Pass-a-Grille Beach, named by French fishermen who once grilled their catch here. Past the unmissable enormous pink Don CeSar hotel (see p. 143), the road and pace of life slows down and you'll find craft galleries, a small historical museum and cluster of good restaurants and cafés nestled amongst tree-lined streets.

Recommended places to eat include **The Wharf** (*727 367 9469*) adjacent to Pass-a-Grille's marina, where families can dine on inexpensive seafood, soups and sandwiches, and closer to the beach, **The Hurricane** (*727 360 9558*) on Gulf Way is the place to sink a bowl of creamy clam chowder (US$5) and watch the sunset from its sea-facing balcony.

Metered parking lines the beach front (US$1.25 per hour), while on the intercoastal waterway side of Pass-a-Grille at 7th Avenue, stands the tiny **Merry Pier** where you can hire bikes (US$8 per hour), hop aboard the shuttle boat to **Shell Key** (*727 360 1348, www.shellkeyshuttle.com*), a small barrier island to the south of Pass-a-Grille, or book a sunset cruise.

Holmes Beach ★

If you want to slip away from European tourists to a beach where Floridian families come to enjoy themselves, Holmes Beach on Anna Marie Island, just north of Sarasota, is an easy-to-reach option. Situated at the end of SR-64 from the mainland, Holmes Beach is a busy stretch of sand with a number of beachside shops and a popular café that opens early for breakfast and provides live entertainment in the evening. This beach is full of life but hasn't sold its soul to big developers.

Fort Myers, Sanibel & Captiva Islands ★★★

INSIDER TIP

If you're approaching Fort Myers from the north on Hwy-41, there's a perfect break stop just before the bridge over the river Caloosahatchee. Here you can park and picnic on a small scenic area overlooking the river.

Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary

18328 Gulf Boulevard, Indian Shores AGE 3 & UP (*727 391 6211* ***www.seabirdsanctuary.com***). Open daily from 9am to sunset, this free sanctuary is accessed from either the beach or main road and is the largest wild-bird hospital and rehabilitation centre in the US. Hundreds of rescue birds can be viewed, including pelicans, owls, gannets, falcons and hawks, and more nest in the surrounding trees or hang out on the beach outside.

A 3.5-hour drive from Orlando, the stretch of the southwest region incorporating the town and beach of **Fort Myers** and islands of **Sanibel** and **Captiva** (***www.fortmyers-sanibel.com***) is one of the best areas in Florida for families, whatever age your children. The beaches are consistently near perfect with some, such as **Bowman's Beach** on Sanibel, maintaining an aura of remote paradise even when busy with sunbathing visitors. Others, including **Lovers Key State Park** to the south of Fort Myers, are a haven for kayaking, cruises and fishing charters to supplement the sunbathing and swimming. There's an abundance of opportunities to get up close to nature on these unspoilt islands, while in contrast Fort Myers Beach is a place to mingle with other tourists and enjoy fun on the sand.

Known as the 'City of Palms', Fort Myers has an old-fashioned charm despite its modern office buildings, and if you have older children, take time off the beach to discover its downtown. **The Edison & Ford Winter Estates,** the one-time winter residences of inventor Thomas Edison and founder of the Ford Motor Company Henry Ford, is the most popular attraction in town (see p. 131). Other attractions include the **Calusa Nature Center & Planetarium** AGE 3 & UP (3450 Ortiz Ave, *239 275 3435,* ***www.calusanature.com***, open 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 11am–5pm Sun, US$9 adults, US$6 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 1–2 hours) where you can experience the area's rich natural history and wildlife, and the **Imaginarium Hands-On Museum & Aquarium** AGE 3 & UP (2000 Cranford Ave, *239 321 7420,* ***www.citymyers.com/imaginarium***, open 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun, US$8 adults, US$5 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 2–3 hours) a fun learning centre that invites all ages to interact

FUN FACT **Palm Trees**

It's illegal to build higher than the tallest palm tree on Sanibel.

FUN FACT **Eagle's Nest**

Look out for the large American bald eagle's nest in a tree behind the Dairy Queen on Sanibel's Periwinkle Way.

with the world of science and nature. If you're seeking a more laid-back attraction, head to the new **Butterfly Estates** AGE 3 & UP (1815 Fowler St, *239 690 2359, www.thebutterflyestates.com*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$15 adults, US$9 children aged 3–16, under 3s free, time 30 minutes). Here visitors are invited to wander through a tranquil tropical conservatory filled with thousands of native butterflies, or munch on butterfly cake at the Flutterby's café.

Stretching along Estero Boulevard, 15 miles south of downtown, Fort Myers' long beach is lined with hotels and low-key resorts with a laid-back, family-friendly atmosphere. At the north end of Estero Boulevard, bordering the busiest part of the beach, is the bustling **Times Square,** a favourite with teenagers and older children. Here you'll find a play area, numerous souvenir and beachwear shops and plenty of inexpensive dining options, most with outdoor seating.

INSIDER TIP

Parking can be hard at Times Square. If you're staying on Estero Boulevard, catch the frequent tram service that runs the length of Fort Myers Beach – including a stop at Lovers Key State Park – from 6am to 10pm. The fare is 50¢.

A short drive from Fort Myers Beach, and reached via a 3-mile causeway, the islands of Sanibel and Captiva are hailed as paradise by many visitors and claim a history rich with Calusa Indians, pirates and Pulitzer-Prize-winning political cartoonists (US$6 toll going to the islands).

Sanibel is dominated by the J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge (see p. 136), named after the cartoonist and conservation activist Jay Norwood Darling. **C.R.O.W.: Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife** ★ AGE 5 & UP (3883 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel, *239 472 3644*, *www.crowclinic.org*, open 10am–4pm, US$5 adults, US$3 teens, under 12s free, time ½–1 hour), lies just west of the refuge's entrance and is a fantastic opportunity for children of all ages to engage with the care of the region's wounded, sick and orphaned wildlife. The clinic treats over 4,000 animals a year and out of respect for their welfare, visitors can't access the hospital itself, but instead are invited to interact with the displays and play at being a vet – don't miss the 11am presentation to learn about the hospital and the animals that are treated and often rehabilitated back into the wild.

Shelling

Sanibel and Captiva are famous for shells and you'll see all ages combing the sands for samples of the hundreds of species found here. Shelling is a good way to keep restless children entertained, although by law you can't remove any shell with a living creature inside from the beach, and it's better to take a few favourite samples rather than bucketsful. **Sanibel's Shell Museum** AGE 6 & UP (3075 Sanibel–Captiva Road, *239 395 2233, www.shellmuseum.org*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$7, US$4 children aged 5–16, under 5s free, time 1 hour) displays shells from all over the world and includes information on what species to look out for on the islands.

There are four public access beaches on Sanibel, and the most popular, especially at sunset, is Bowman's to the west (US$2 per hour, parking fee). However, rarely found by many visitors is the **Bailey Tract,** a network of secluded nature trails leading off Tarpon Bay Road near the Sanibel River. The tract is named after the original owner of Bailey's General Store (Periwinkle Way and Tarpon Bay Road, open 7am–9pm daily), a superb local supermarket crammed full of supplies for a beach picnic.

Head to the far eastern tip of Sanibel to see the island's old lighthouse (US$2 per hour, parking fee), which was first lit in 1884 and a tall nesting pole housing a large osprey's nest.

The best way to get around Sanibel is by bike and many resorts offer guests complimentary bike hire. Otherwise try **Billy's Rentals** (1470 Periwinkle Way, *239 472 5248, www.billysrentals.com*, open 8:30am–5pm Mon–Sat), who rent a range of bikes and trailers from US$5 for 2 hours, or **Finnimore's Cycle** (2353 Periwinkle Way, 239 472 5577, *www.finnimores.com*, open daily 9am–4pm) where bikes can be hired from US$9 for 4 hours.

Travel west from Sanibel across Blind Pass and you'll reach the tiny Captiva Island. Visitors travel here to indulge in a remote island paradise, but there are plenty of activities to keep children entertained and even a lively nightlife. Tourist activities are focused around the

FUN FACT

Treasure Ghosts

According to legend, Spanish pirate José Gaspar based himself in the Sanibel/Captiva area. The small island of Cayo Pelau to the north of Captiva is reputedly haunted by the ghosts of his fellow pirates, still protecting the treasure they buried there.

FUN FACT **Crackers**

The early Florida settlers who chose a self-sufficient lifestyle are known as Crackers. It's believed that this term originates from the sound of their whips as they drove cattle through rural Florida.

art galleries, cafés and restaurants of Andy Rosse Lane, and the stretch of beach outside the **Mucky Duck Pub** (*239 472 3434, www.muckyduck.com*, closed Sun) at the end of this lane is the busiest on the island. Founded in the 1970s by an ex London bobby, The Mucky Duck is a popular, family-friendly gastro pub where you can dine on the edge of the beach, and any Brit missing their local can pop in for a quick game of darts. At the other end of Andy Rosse Lane, you'll find **McCarthy's Marina,** where a number of cruise operators (see Captiva Cruises p. 136) and kayak tour and rental companies (see Captiva Kayaks and Wildside Adventures p. 136) are based.

A host of family-friendly, often quirky, places to eat can be found on both Sanibel and Captiva islands, while Bailey's Shopping Center at the corner of Periwinkle Way and Tarpon Bay Road on Sanibel, contains the small **Island Cinema** (*239 472 1701, www.islandcinema.com*, tickets US$10, US$8 under 12s).

Top Family Attractions

Crowley Museum & Nature Center ★★ AGE 5 & UP

16405 Myakka Road, Sarasota, 941 322 1000. www.crowleymuseumnaturectr.org.

For an authentic slice of off-the-beaten-track Florida head approximately 18 miles east from Sarasota to this enchanting attraction on the northern edges of the Myakka River State Park. Set amongst endless acres of wildlife rich countryside, the Crowley Museum is crammed with artefacts embodying Florida's rural history. While the reconstructed pioneer cottage, blacksmith shop and working sugar cane mill offer a fascinating insight into the life of the homesteader. Make time to follow in the footsteps of those early pioneers by exploring the network of nature trails and boardwalks that lead through surrounding pine flatwoods, oak hammocks and marshland.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–4pm Thurs–Sun Oct–Apr, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun May–Sept.* ***Adm*** *US$7, US$3 children aged 5–12, under 5s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Edison & Ford Winter Estates ★ AGE 9 & UP

2350 McGregor Boulevard, Fort Myers, 239 334 7419, www.efwefla.org.

Thomas Edison, one of the world's most prolific inventors, created an idyllic winter retreat in Fort Myers, which his wife dedicated to the town after his death. The estate straddles two sides of McGregor Boulevard. One side,

Edison's laboratory, Fort Myers

with a spectacular waterfront setting, features Edison's charming Victorian home and guest house, both decorated with original furnishings, and beautiful landscaped gardens complete with a fabulous swimming pool (no longer in use). Better for children is the other side of the estate, where you'll find Edison's fascinating laboratory – his 1920s light bulbs still burn brightly. The small museum on this side contains an education area with fact and activity sheets, including one explaining how to make a light bulb, and a Peanuts cartoon depicting the life, times and work of Edison and Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5:30pm daily, last guided tours depart 4pm.* ***Adm*** *Laboratory and Museum tour US$12, US$5 children aged 6–12, under 6s free. Additional tours of homes and gardens are available at an extra cost.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

G.Wiz – The Science Museum

★ AGE 3 & UP

1001 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota, 941 309 4949, www.gwiz.org.

Any family staying in the Sarasota area or travelling along Hwy-41 should make time to explore this super- fun science museum, which is both educational and entertaining. Wild and wacky exhibits cover topics such as renewable energy, local habitats, light and sound waves and the human body. But by far the most popular exhibit is the mind ball where visitors get the chance to move a ball using the power of their minds.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–5pm Tues–Sat, noon–5pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$9 adults, US$6 children aged 3–18, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Muscle Car City AGE 10 & UP

3811 Tamiami Trail (Hwy-41), Punta Gorda, 941 575 5959, www.musclecarcity.net.

This new museum is a not-to-be-missed attraction for any family member who loves classic cars or Americana memorabilia. Fabulous old neon signs and gas pumps line the walls of this large museum, which contains row after row of lovingly restored American classic cars and hot rods from the 1920s onwards. Highlights include old Coca-Cola delivery vans, an amazing 1928 Chevrolet gypsy van and a collection of sleek Corvettes. Pick up vintage memorabilia or even a classic car of your own at the onsite shop where a 1971 roadster will set you back a cool US$32,000. Or down a cheeseburger and root beer float at the 1960s-style diner.

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm Tues–Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$12.50, under 12s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Catch a glimpse of John Lennon's psychedelic 1956 Bentley and Paul McCartney's old Mini Cooper at the Sarasota Classic Car Museum (*941 355 6228, www.sarasotacarmuseum.org*) opposite the entrance to the Ringling Estate off Hwy-41.

The Ringling Estate

★★★ **AGE 7 & UP**

5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota, 941 359 5700, www.ringling.org.

This magnificent estate and legacy of circus showman John Ringling is the most outstanding attraction in the Sarasota area and it deserves a full day to appreciate. The rambling grounds are free to enter but there is a charge for admission to the four very different venues on this grandiose property. Housed in an enormous Italian palazzo-style building, the Museum of Art – Florida's official art museum – features a distinguished permanent collection of 17th-century Baroque art as well as work from Europe, Asia and America.

A homage to Venetian gothic architecture, the 32-roomed Cà d'Zan stands on the edge of Sarasota Bay and was once Ringling's lavish winter home. The best place for children, and first of its kind, is the fabulous Circus Museum, which includes a fascinating collection of carved parade wagons, posters, props and an intricate miniature circus made up of eight tents, 1,300 performers and 300 animals. The final venue is the Asolo theatre, an 18th-century Italian playhouse transported from Italy and painstakingly reassembled here.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$25 adults, US$10 children aged 6–17, under 6s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

FUN FACT **King of Inventors**

Edison was the king of inventors and held over 1,000 patents for everything from light bulbs to cement.

Southwest Coast Aquariums

A number of aquariums are dotted along Florida's southwest coast. The largest is downtown Tampa's **Florida Aquarium** ★★ AGE 3 & UP (701 Channelside Drive, Tampa, *813 273 4000, www.flaquarium.org*, open 9:30am–5pm daily, US$20, US$15 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, parking US$5, time 2–3 hours). This impressive attraction features thousands of aquatic plants and animals, and takes visitors through the journey of a drop of water from the Florida wetlands to a coral reef. Explore a Shore aquatic discovery zone is an educational play area designed for 3 to 13-year-olds and children love the impressive shark exhibit. The aquarium runs 90-minute catamaran eco trips into Tampa Bay, where visitors view aquatic animals in the wild (US$22 adults, US$18 children, admission and boat tours combination tickets US$36 adult, US$28 children).

Admission to the **Clearwater Marine Aquarium** AGE 3 & UP (249 Windward Passage, Clearwater Beach, *727 441 1790, www.cmaquarium.org*, open 9am–5pm Mon–Thurs, 9am–7pm Fri & Sat, 10am–5pm Sun, US$13, US$9 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 2–3 hours) lasts all day. Come and go as you please to view the sealife in pools and watch animal presentations throughout the day. Regular behind-the-scenes tours highlight the aquarium's rescue work and the Sea Life Safari cruises take visitors out to sea with a marine biologist. Both of these tours are extra and combination tickets are available.

Born in captivity in 1948, Snooty the Manatee lives at the **Parker Manatee Aquarium** AGE 3 & UP in Bradenton and shares his pool with young manatees being prepared for release. The aquarium forms part of the South Florida Museum (201 10th Street, Bradenton, *941 746 4131, www.southfloridamuseum.org*, open 10am–5pm Tues–Sat, noon–5pm Sun, US$16, US$12 children aged 4–12, under 4s free, time 1 hour).

Admission to Sarasota's **Mote Marine Aquarium** AGE 3 & UP (600 Ken Thomas Parkway, City Island, *941 388 4441, www.mote.org*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$17 adults, US$12 children aged 4–12, under 4s free, time 1–2 hours) includes an interactive shark movie at the Immersion Cinema, sting ray touch pools and access to the rehabilitation centre.

Salvador Dalí Museum

★★★ AGE 12 & UP

1000 3rd Street South, St. Petersburg, 727 823 3767, www.salvadordalimuseum.org.

St. Petersburg is an unlikely place to find the world's most comprehensive collection of work by a surrealist master, but a mile south of downtown you'll come upon the impressive home to 1,000 original works by this eccentric and renowned Spanish artist. It's worth bringing your children here just to see the giant *Discovery of America by Christopher*

Columbus and *The Hallucinogenic Toreador*, but you can easily spend a couple of hours taking in the whole collection. Free hour-long narrated tours run regularly throughout the day. And, at the time of writing, a brand new, visually stunning building, complete with a theatre, which will screen Dalí's films, is being constructed eight blocks north of the current museum and will eventually house the collection.

Time** 1–2 hr. **Open** 9:30am–5:30pm Mon–Wed, Fri & Sat, 9:30am–8pm Thurs, noon–5:30pm Sun. **Adm** US$17, US$4 children aged 5–9, under 5s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

Child-Friendly Tours

Babcock Wilderness Adventures Eco Tours

★★ GREEN AGE 5 & UP

*8000 State Road 31, Punta Gorda, 1 800 500 5583, **www.babcockwilderness.com**.*

About an hour's drive from Fort Myers, Babcock Wilderness Adventures are perfect for a taste of the landscape and wildlife of the Everglades. Before you set off on a specially built swamp buggy into the heart of a 90,000-acre ranch, Babcock's tour guides warn you to expect 'nature unscripted'. The ranch is farmed using traditional methods – its cowboys still ride horses – and is as eco-friendly as possible. Tours take visitors through a range of natural environments including swamps, pinewoods and prairie flats, where you encounter cracker cattle, alligators, birdlife, cute wild pigs and wild, predatory cats. The wildlife experts leading the tours share their amazing knowledge of the ranch's history and animal life and you can expect a Florida critter to make a surprise appearance. Reservations and mosquito repellent both essential.

Two Sarasota Gardens

Overlooking Sarasota Bay, the beautiful and tranquil Marie Selby Botanical Gardens AGE 5 & UP (811 South Palm Avenue, entrance off Hwy-41, Sarasota, *941 366 5731, **www.selby.org***, open 10am–5pm daily, US$17, US$6 children aged 6–11, under 6s free, time 2 hours) feature a large collection of tropical plants, meandering pathways and koi ponds, making a pleasant break from the beach. Children particularly enjoy the rainforest area with its collection of dart bull frogs. Less tranquil is one of Sarasota's best-kept family secrets, the **Children's Garden** AGE 12 & UNDER (1670 10th Way Sarasota, *941 330 1711, **www.sarasotachildrensgarden.com***, open 10am–5pm daily, US$10, US$5 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 1 hour). The mazes, sculptures and play areas in this creative garden make for a perfect pit-stop with under 5s. Turn east off Hwy-41 onto 10th Street, left on to Orange Avenue and right onto 10th Way for the garden.

Time *1½ hr.* ***Open*** *All tours are by reservation only, telephone for times and to make a reservation.* ***Adm*** *US$20, US$13 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Captiva Cruises AGE 10 & UP

McCarthy's Marina, Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva Island, 239 472 5300, www.captivacruises.com.

Captiva Cruises' fleet of boats take visitors on a range of tours around the tranquil waters surrounding Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel and Captiva islands. Families wanting to sunbathe, shell and picnic can pick either a full- or half-day excursion to the glorious Cayo Costa State Park or the trip to Cabbage Key allows visitors a couple of hours on this popular island, but there's little to keep children entertained. All trips are accompanied by a commentary on the history and geology of your destination and the islands you pass on the way. Reservations are required 1 week or less before a trip.

Time *Varies.* ***Open*** *Telephone for tour dates and times.* ***Adm*** *Prices range from US$25, US$15 children aged 3–12, under 3s free to US$45 adults, US$35 children.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

For Active Families

Captiva Kayaks & Wildside Adventures ★★★ AGE 5 & UP

McCarthy's Marina, Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva Island, 239 395 2925, www.captivakayaks.com.

You don't have to be an experienced kayaker to get out and enjoy the placid coastal waters around Captiva with Captiva Kayaks, as this local company takes all ages and abilities on highly recommended tours. The shallow waters are perfect for children new to kayaking and little ones as young as 2 years old have been out with Greg and Barb, who run the tours. Experienced kayakers won't be disappointed either, as skimming around the island at water level is the perfect way to get up close to the environments and the animals that live there. And, if you're lucky, the elusive manatee will get close to you.

Time *Varies.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily.* ***Prices*** *The various guided tours range from US$35 adults, US$25 under 18s, to US$55 adults, US$45 under 18s. Kayak rental also available.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

INSIDER TIP

Doc Ford's Sanibel (*239 472 8311, www.docfordssanibel.com*) on the corner of Rabbit Road and the Sanibel Captiva Road is a recommended family-friendly lunch option near the entrance to the J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge ★★★ AGE 10 & UP

Sanibel–Captiva Road, Sanibel Island, 239 472 1100, www.fws.gov/dingdarling.

Covering around 6,400 acres, this stunning reserve is famous for its multitude of birds and wildlife. A

FUN FACT **Destino**

In 1946, Dalí and Walt Disney worked together on a short animated film called Destino.

number of trails, including the 2-mile Indigo Trail loop, wind through the refuge, but the most popular way through is via its 4-mile one-way Wildlife Drive which visitors can drive, cycle or walk along. Bikes, and kayaks if you prefer to explore at water level, can be hired from the onsite **Tarpon Bay Explorers** (*239 472 8900* ***www.tarponbayexplorers.com***). This company also run 90-minute interpretive tram tours through the refuge throughout the day which are perfect for finding out more about the landscape and the wildlife it supports (US$13, US$8 children aged 2–12, under 2s free). The best time to experience the Wildlife Drive is at sunset when birds return to roost. Although the entrance shuts at 5:30pm, the exit stays open so arrive late and take time watching the sunset and wildlife settling down for the night.

The refuge's Education Center features interactive exhibits explaining the surrounding ecosystems and a bird-watching area, while its gift shop stocks a good range of children's books.

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *Wildlife Drive 7:30am to half an hour before sunset Sat–Thurs. Education Center daily 9am–5pm Jan–Apr, 9am–4pm May–Dec.* ***Adm*** *to the Wildlife Drive US$5 per car, US$1 per cyclist.* ***Amenities***

Pinellas Trail

Stretching from Tarpon Springs to St. Petersburg, the Pinellas Trail is a 37-mile paved pathway through parks and along the coast with refreshment spots en route. Bikes can be hired at various points on the trail, including **Pinellas Trail Bike Shop** (357 Scotland Street, *727 734 5976*) and **Energy Conservatory Bike Shop** (745 Main Street, *727 736 4432*) both in Dunedin (see p. 139).

Shopping

John's Pass Village & Boardwalk

www.johnspass.com.

The meandering wooden waterfront boardwalks of John's Pass, an old fishing village at Madeira Beach (see p. 137) are crammed with quirky souvenir, clothes and crafts shops. This popular shopping hot spot is perfect for families, as there are a number of fun places to eat. It is right in

FUN FACT **Bird Life**

93% of all species of birds are monogamous.

the middle of St. Pete's beaches (see p. 144), so you can hop back onto the sand the minute you've had enough of shopping.

St. Armands Circle

www.visitstarmandscircle.com.

Turn off Hwy-41 and drive over John Ringling Causeway, away from downtown Sarasota towards Lido Key and you'll hit the large landscaped roundabout of St. Armands Circle. Filling the pavements of this circle, and the four main roads that lead off it, is a collection of upmarket shops recommended for quality clothes and gift shopping. Keep children occupied in Kilwin's confectionery shop, with its fabulous ice cream and onsite fudge factory, or Scoop Daddy's retro memorabilia store serving delicious old-fashioned milkshakes.

INSIDER TIP

Parking on St. Armands Circle can be difficult. Free parking is available on either north or south Adams Drive, which John Ringling Boulevard crosses one block before the circle, and Fillmore Drive on the south side of St. Armands.

Sanibel Island

You'll find a host of quirky, independent, often upmarket shops and galleries tucked away off Sanibel's tree-lined Periwinkle Way. A collection of stores including **Pandora's Box** (*239 472 4600,* open 10am–6pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun), a shopaholic's haven of children's toys, retro gifts and jewellery, can be found in Periwinkle Place, the island's main shopping centre. Also worth a stop is the Sanibel **Island Bookshop** (1571 Periwinkle Way, *239 472 5223, www.sanibelbookshop.com*, open 10am–6pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun) where you can browse for hours through a rich selection of books and unusual gifts, including a large children's section.

John's Pass Village & Boardwalk

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

Tampa

INEXPENSIVE

Fresh Mouth Grill ★

Plaza Level at the Grand Staircase, Ybor City, Tampa, 813 241 8845, www.freshmouthfl.com.

An authentic American dining experience in the heart of Ybor City, Fresh Mouth is a buzzing, laid-back restaurant packed with students, tourists and local business folk. Teenagers will love this hip eatery where you can squeeze into a booth, perch on a high stool at the bar or sit outside and enjoy the sights of Centro Ybor. Their burgers are excellent – the veggie burger is the best I've eaten in Florida – and I don't believe anyone's mouth is big enough to accommodate the enormous Lock Jaw burger.

***Open** 11am–11pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–2am Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$5–US$9. **Credit** MC, V.*

Dunedin

INEXPENSIVE/MODERATE

Casa Tina ★

365 Main Street, Dunedin, 727 734 9226, www.casatinas.com.

Extremely popular with locals and one of the friendliest restaurants in southwest Florida, Casa Tina is lively and welcoming to children. Infused with an amiable atmosphere and filled with subdued lighting, upbeat music and cheerful conversation, this fun restaurant serves authentic, gourmet Mexican cuisine. The excellent menu contains something to please all family members, even fussy vegetarian teens, and takeaway is also available.

Open** 11am–10pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–midnight Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$7–US$17. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

Run by the same owners as Casa Tina, Pan y Vino wine and tapas bar next door is recommended for a low-key night out.

St. Petersburg & St. Pete's beaches

MODERATE

Conch Republic

16699 Gulf Boulevard, North Redington Beach, 727 320 0536, www.conchrepublicgrill.com.

Catch a little Key West charm at this uber casual but lively grill and raw bar. All the food is freshly cooked every day and seafood dominates the relatively small menu, which also features pasta dishes and ribs. The desserts are enormous and to die for – try the upside-down apple pie made with caramelised walnuts and cinnamon. This section of St. Pete's beaches is far less commercial than some areas so you can combine time messing about on a chilled-out beach with lunch or dinner.

Open** 11am–10pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–11pm Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$10–US$28. **Credit** AE, MC, DC, DISC, V. **Amenities

Columbia Restaurant

www.columbiarestaurant.com.

Founded in 1905 by a Cuban immigrant, the Columbia Restaurant is a Florida institution, with establishments in **Sarasota** (411 St. Armands Circle, *941 388 3987*), **St. Petersburg's Pier** (800 2nd Avenue NE, *727 822 8000*), **Clearwater Beach** (1241 Gulf Boulevard, *727 596 8400*) and – best of all – **Ybor City** (2117 East 7th Avenue, *813 248 4961*) where flamenco dancers provide nightly entertainment. The award-winning menu features dishes made with old family recipes and variations on Spanish tapas and paella, but, as the children's menu is basic, get adventurous youngsters to try tapas instead. Invest in the restaurant's own Spanish cookbook to recreate Columbia's most famous dishes at home.

Moon Under Water ★

*332 Beach Drive NE, St. Petersburg, 727 896 6160, **www.themoonunderwater.com.***

This very 'colonial' tavern, near St. Pete's Pier and overlooking Tampa Bay, specialises in British and Indian cuisine. Traditional pub grub, including fish and chips and bangers and mash, features heavily on the menu that also includes staple American fare such as burgers and salads. However, it's the Moon Under Water curries that shine, both on the menu and in helping to conjure up the allure of the bygone days of the Raj. Linger over a Tikka Masala or an Authentic Moon Curry inside the panelled dining room or at one of the outside tables. There's also a decent children's menu and live music at the weekends.

Open** 11am–11pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–1am Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$10–US$20. **Credit** AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

Frozen custard is a delicious alternative to ice cream and you can try some at **Sweet Berries Eatery in Bradenton** (4500 Manatee Avenue West) or Sarasota (2881 Clark Road). ***www.sweetberries.com.***

Sarasota/St. Armands Circle

MODERATE

Cha Cha Coconuts

*417 St. Armands Circle, Sarasota 941 388 3300, **www.chachacoconuts.com.***

At first glance, many of the restaurants on St. Armands Circle appear to focus on adult dining, but if you're eating out in this area with children, especially in the evening, Cha Cha Coconuts is a family-friendly option. This bright, boisterous tropical-style restaurant has indoor seating, but I like the outside tables where you can feel a part of this

lively area. The menu has a Caribbean twist and features seafood, jerk chicken sandwiches, burgers and steaks, and dishes on the children's menu (for the under 10s) come with island fries and a soft drink. In the evenings a steel-drum player provides rhythmical entertainment.

Open *11am–11pm Mon–Thurs, 11am–midnight Sat & Sun.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$17.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

If you're travelling through Venice, to the south of Sarasota, pop into the **Soda Fountain** (349 West Venice Avenue, *941 412 9860*, open 11am–9pm Mon–Sat), a traditional diner where you sit in candy-coloured booths or on circular stools at the soda bar and enjoy creamy milkshakes or speciality cherry pop.

Fort Myers, Sanibel & Captiva

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

The Bubble Room ★

15001 Captiva Drive, Captiva, 239 472 5558, ***www.bubbleroomrestaurant.com****.*

Packed with colourful memorabilia, this fascinating restaurant is entertaining for children because its decor is so much fun. All kinds of toys, old-fashioned paraphernalia and film memorabilia are crammed into every space possible, and if you want to take a bit of the restaurant home, a separate emporium sells gifts and souvenirs. The

The Bubble Room, Captiva

restaurant consists of five wacky dining areas and a bubble train trucks through all of them at regular intervals.

Main courses are predominantly steak and seafood dishes and the enormous, fluffy homemade desserts are famous throughout the region.

Open *11:30am–3pm & 4:30–9:30pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *Lunch US$9–US$16, dinner US$20–US$30.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INEXPENSIVE/MODERATE

The Island Cow ★★

2163 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel, 239 472 0606, ***www.sanibelislandcow.com****.*

Proud to serve 'udderly great food', The Island Cow is one of the best family-friendly dining options on Sanibel and superfun for young children. The restaurant walls are lined with cows of all shapes and sizes or, if

you'd rather eat al fresco, pull up a chair at one of the tables lining the outside porch. The large breakfast menu features omelettes, waffles and buttermilk pancakes, and you'll need plenty of time to choose from the eclectic lunch and dinner options, which include steaks, burgers, pasta, quesadillas and plenty of fish dishes. The food is consistently good and accompanied by live music most evenings. Takeaway also available.

Open *7am–10:30pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$20.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Located just past The Island Cow towards Captiva is the Sanibel Community Park, which features a large children's play area.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

EXPENSIVE

Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach ★★

301 South Gulf Boulevard, Clearwater Beach, *727 373 1234,* ***www.clearwaterbeach.hyatt.com****.*

It's hard to miss this massive, brand new coral- coloured resort in the centre of Clearwater Beach, which dominates the beachfront to the south of Pier 60. The first-class accommodation is a mix of rooms and suites, all of which are more spacious than those offered by many competing resorts, and all command an ocean view. I recommend this resort for families because every room contains a full kitchen and the onsite recreation facilities include a Camp Hyatt kids club and secure children's pool. This resort is bang in the centre of Clearwater Beach, yet also offers a haven when things get busy.

Rooms *250.* ***Rates*** *From US$189.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

Captiva Island Inn ★

11509 Andy Rosse Lane, Captiva, *239 395 0882,* ***www.captivaislandinn.com****.*

This charming, eclectic inn is about as far away from generic resorts or bland hotels as you can get. There are 21, all very different, rooms, suites, cottages and houses to rent. However, it's the location that appeals to me, as Captiva Island Inn is situated right in the heart of island life. A great beach is right on the doorstep, as is McCarthy's marina, while a number of shops and eating options are all within easy walking distance, making this the kind of place where you don't have to drive long distances in order to have a good time. Young children will love the laid-back feel and older teens can go off and explore alone without ever being too far away. Full breakfast is included with the room rate.

Rooms *21 cottages/apartments, a five-bedroomed house and three B&B rooms.* ***Rates*** *From US$99–US$1,590.*

Tampa & Dunedin

Beyond Busch Gardens (see p. 78), the most tourist-focused area to stay in Tampa is Ybor City (see p. 120). Recommended is **The Hampton Inn and Suites** (1301 East 7th Avenue, *813 247 6700, www.tampayborcitysuites.hamptoninn.com*, rooms from US$120). Right on the trolley line and within easy walking distance of Ybor's shops and restaurants, this comfortable chain hotel offers guests special deals to the local attractions. Park your car at the hotel (US$7 per night) as car crime is high in this area.

Dunedin is a convenient base from which to visit Tampa – Busch Gardens is only 27 miles away – and nearby beaches, and has two family accommodation options. **The Holiday Inn Express** (972 Broadway, *727 450 1200, www.hiexpress.com/dunedin*, rooms from US$119), a quiet, comfortable hotel on the corner of Alt-19 to Clearwater and SR-580 to Tampa, and **Best Western Yacht Inn** (150 Marina Plaza, *727 733 4121, www.advantuscopr.com*, rooms from US$130) located in the marina and with excellent waterfront views. Both hotels have pools and are close to the downtown area.

Credit *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** ***In cottages/suites/house***

Don CeSar Beach Resort

★★★ GREEN

3400 Gulf Boulevard, St. Pete's Beach, 727 360 1881, www.doncesar.com.

Built in 1928, this fabulous ornate pink hotel has hosted the famous and infamous, from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Al Capone, and is one of Florida's truly special hotels. Standing proud at the head of the wild and beautiful Pass-a-Grille Beach, 'the Don' distinguishes itself as a luxury resort with excellent facilities for families. Based on American summer camps, Camp CeSar is a special programme designed to provide 5 to 10-year-olds with daily supervised activities, including jewellery making, beach exploration, scavenger hunts – even etiquette lessons – and themed dinner parties. Parents (and older children) can enjoy water aerobics, beachside yoga, beach volleyball and much more. The resort's bedrooms and suites are spacious and comfortable – not that, with so much going on, your children will want to spend much time in them.

Rooms *277.* ***Rates*** *From US$250, plus US$10 per person resort fee. Check website for special packages.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

INSIDER TIP

Learn all about the Don CeSar's history and hauntings via daily tours of the hotel, which are open

to residents and non-residents. The tours cost US$5 cash per person, *727 360 1881* to book in advance.

Little Harbor ★★

611 Destiny Drive, Ruskin, 813 645 3291, www.staylittleharbor.com.

Nestled on the edge of Tampa Bay and close to both Tampa and Sarasota, Little Harbor is a great base for families wanting to explore this area. The many facilities will keep all ages occupied and the resort's Tiki Bar is right by its private beach – so parents can relax and watch cruise ships drift in and out of Tampa Bay while children play on the sand. What I like about this resort is the range and quality of its accommodation, including hotel suites and town homes, all with waterfront views and most self-catering. Many are owned by American families who rent them out for most of the year, which gives the resort a pleasant community feel. For those not wanting to self-cater, the onsite eating options are better than average and this expanding complex has a good range of leisure facilities, including three

Clearwater Beach & St. Pete's Beaches

Clearwater Beach has a wide variety of accommodation, from new, multi-storey resorts to small, family-run motels. Stick to well-known chains or big resorts if you're booking unseen, as the quality of accommodation can be unreliable. A large amount of construction work has taken place in Clearwater, which isn't over yet, and this, combined with the beach's boisterous nightlife, makes Sand Key (see p. 125) a few miles south a better option for families with small children. Recommended Clearwater hotels include the **Clearwater Beach Hilton** GREEN (400 Manderlay Avenue, *727 461 3222, www.clearwaterbeachresort.com*, rooms from US$169), which is close to Pier 60 and set up for families and the **Best Western Sea Wake Beach Resort** (691 South Gulfview Boulevard, *727 443 7652, www.bestwestern.com*, rooms from US$90).

Long favoured by US families, St. Pete's beaches have a comprehensive range of family-friendly accommodation. The beachside **Sunset Vistas** on Treasure Island Beach (12000 Gulf Boulevard, *866 597 1600, www.sunsetvistas.com*, rooms from US$130) is within striking distance of St. Petersburg and John's Pass, and contains two- and three-bedroom self-catering suites, a large pool area complete with fountains and beach access.

For further information on accommodation options in Clearwater Beach see *www.clearwaterbeach.com* and on St. Pete's Beaches see *www.saintpetebeach.com*.

Fort Myers, Sanibel & Captiva Islands

Set up to fulfil any family's accommodation requirements and with an increasing number of British tourists arriving by package tour, this region can provide everything from a large lively resort on Fort Myers Beach, to quaint and quiet self-catering cottages on Sanibel. You can explore many of the options in this region at its visitor website ***www.fortmyers-sanibel.com***.

If you're looking for self-catering accommodation near Fort Myers, Sanibel and Captiva, there are a number of companies which rent holiday homes, including **Sanibel and Captiva Central Reservations** (***www.sanibel-captivarent.com***) and **Resort Quest** (***www.resortquestswfl.com***). Peak season runs from January to April, outside of this period hotel rates are 30 to 60% lower and it's generally cheaper to stay on Fort Myers Beach than on the islands.

pools, a children's playground and basketball courts.

Rooms *Varies.* ***Rates*** *Rooms from US$178, suites from US$220, town homes from US$300.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** ***In suites and town homes***

INSIDER TIP

The Toronto Blue Jays Major League Baseball team undertake their spring training programme at the Dunedin Stadium. Check the Blue Jays' website (***http://toronto.bluejays.mlb.com***) to see if your stay coincides with a game, and if so book your accommodation well in advance.

Outrigger Beach Resort ★

6200 Estero Boulevard, Fort Myers Beach, 239 463 3131, ***www.outriggerfmb.com****.*

Overlooking a wide, pristine and quiet stretch of Fort Myers Beach, but still close enough to the lively Times Square, Outrigger is perfect for families and is my favourite place to stay along this stretch of coastline. The resort has a variety of rooms to suit all budgets, from beachfront suites with fantastic views, to smaller rooms facing the pool and, more private, garden rooms. Many of the resort's simple, yet comfortable, rooms have kitchenettes and are set up for self-catering, and there's a small restaurant on site or the larger **Charley's Boathouse Grill** across the road (*239 765 4700,* ***www.boathousegrill.net***). What I particularly like about this resort is that its popular Tiki Bar is full of life, and often live music, as the sun sets over the ocean in front of it, but with a closing time of 9pm, those wanting to party late into the night move on elsewhere. There's also a cinema and shops nearby.

Sarasota

Families wanting to stay in Sarasota should consider accommoda-tion close to St. Armands Circle because of its proximity to beaches, shops and restaurants. **Lido Beach Holiday Inn** (233 Ben Franklin Drive, *941 388 5555, www.lidobeachholidayinn.com*, rooms from US$130) and **Lido Beach Resort** (700 Ben Franklin Drive, *941 388 2161, www.lidobeachresort.com*, rooms from US$170) are both close to a beautiful beach and just blocks away from St. Armands Circle. Those looking for cheaper accommodation will find a number of decent chain motels on Hwy-41 north of John Ringling Causeway, including the convenient and attractive **La Quinta** (1803 North Tamiami Trail, *941 366 5128, www.lq.com*, rooms US$95).

Rooms *144.* ***Rates*** *Rooms US$125–US$225, beachfront suites US$200–US$330.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.*
Amenities ***In room***

Sanibel Inn ★★ GREEN

937 East Gulf Drive, Sanibel, 239 472 1400, www.sanibelcollection.com.

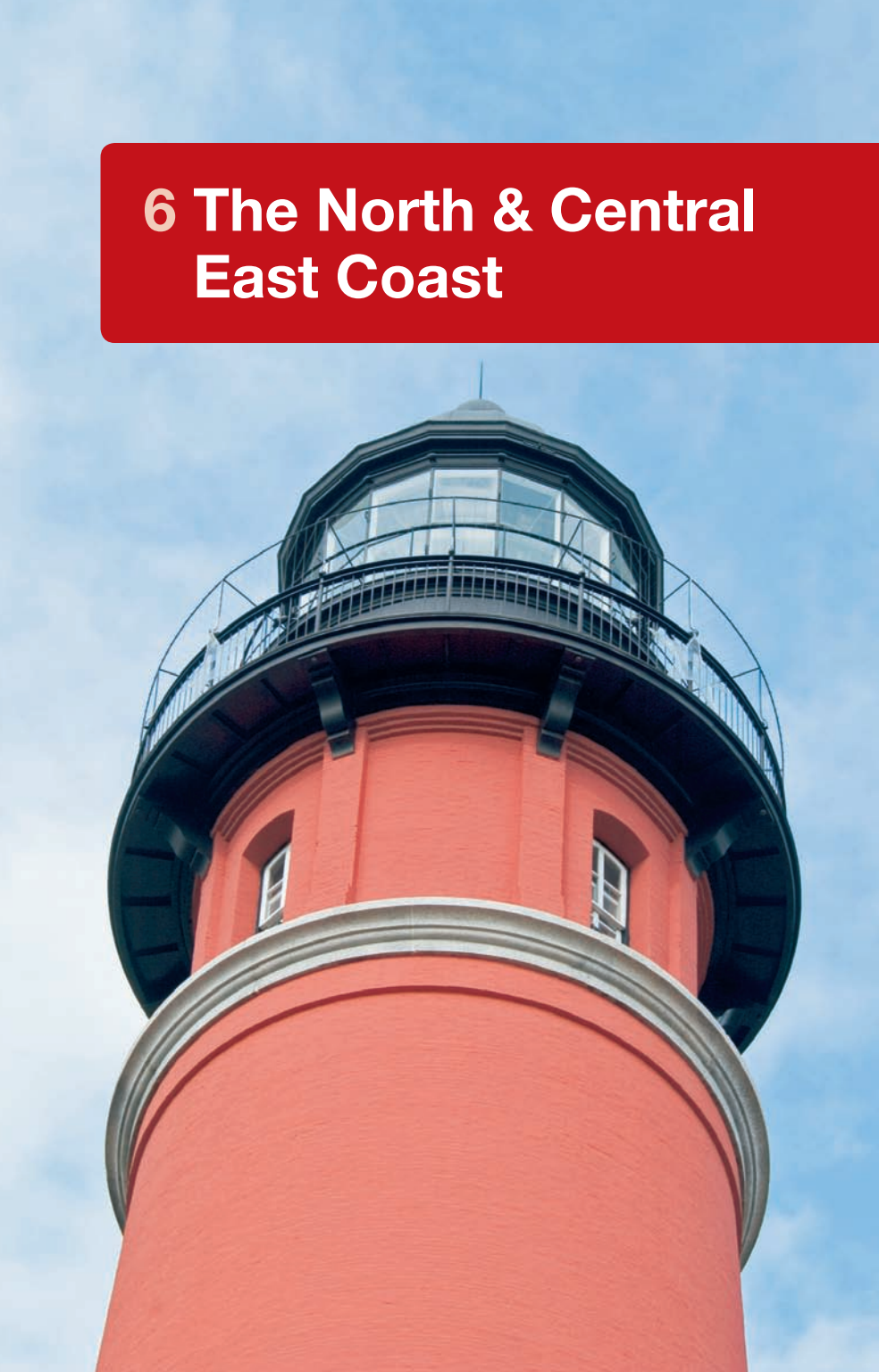
Situated a shell's throw away from the beach, Sanibel Inn has all you'd expect from a top hotel in a paradise island setting. Planted with native species to attract hummingbirds, butterflies and turtles, it's the hotel's grounds that I love, and children can enjoy numerous daily nature-based activities, including shell safaris and dolphin watching. The large, airy rooms and suites reflect the hotel's natural surroundings and feature wicker furnishings and soft colours, and all have screened porches so you can enjoy the evening air without suffering the mosquitoes. This hotel is serious about being Green – its old newspapers are given to C.R.O.W. (see p. 129) and used as animal bedding. The Sanibel Inn is also part of the Sanibel Collection chain and, as such, guests get free use of facilities at the group's other resorts.

Rooms *94.* ***Rates*** *Rooms from US$145, suites from US$160.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

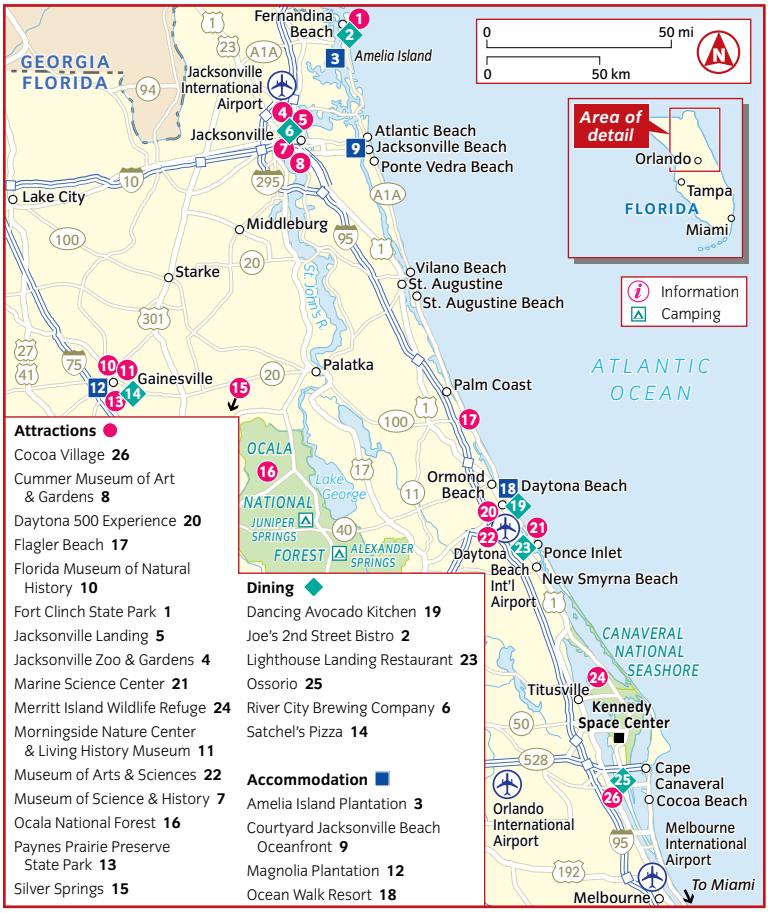
INSIDER TIP

Punta Gorda's Fisherman's Village (1200 West Retta Esplanade, Punta Gorda, *941 639 8721, www.fishville.com*, rooms from US$140 per night), a renovated fishing pier jutting into the Peace River, is an appealing place to break a journey between Sarasota and Fort Myers. Along with a peaceful waterfront park, shops and excellent villa-style accommodation, you'll find a number of restaurants – try Harpoon Harry's at the end of the pier.

6 The North & Central East Coast



THE NORTH & CENTRAL EAST COAST



With its attractive mix of wide Atlantic-facing beaches, vibrant city life, untamed nature refuges and fascinating heritage, Florida's north and central east coast has something for all ages. From the windswept, sparsely populated Fernandina Beach in the far north, to the popular surfer beach at Cocoa – the closest beach to both Disney and the Kennedy Space Center – this region's beaches are some of the wildest in Florida – although none come alive until April onwards due to cooler winters. The fascinating stretch of coastline from Amelia Island to St. Augustine, known as the First Coast, in honour of the early European settlers who developed communities here, is more popular with history loving families than those seeking time out on the beach. The many historical attractions in this area bring the past alive, making it accessible and fun for all ages. Families with older

children seeking culture and art should head inland to the thoroughly modern Jacksonville, home to some of the northeast's finest museums and galleries. Further south, Daytona Beach is famous for land speed records and its International Speedway, as well as many cultural attractions and even a turtle hospital. Tear yourself away from the coast to discover Gainesville, this region's hidden gem where experiencing a slice of Florida's cultural life and great outdoors is affordable for all budgets.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

Jacksonville's most convenient visitor information centre is located in Jacksonville Landing on Independent Drive adjacent to the city's waterfront. It is open 10am to 7pm Monday to Saturday and noon to 5:30pm Sunday (*904 791 4305, www.jaxcvb.com*). An information centre at the airport is open 9am to 10pm daily. St. Augustine's main visitor information centre is situated on Castillo Drive, opposite the Castillo de San Marcos (*904 825 100, www.visitoldcity.com*). It is open 8:30am to 5:30pm daily and includes a film detailing the city and its history. For information on Daytona Beach, visit the Convention and Visitor Bureau at 126 E Orange Avenue (*386 255 0415, www.daytonabeach.com*) between 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. There is also a visitor information booth at the Daytona 500 Experience (see p. 163).

Orientation

I-95 is the quickest route linking the towns and cities spread along Florida's central and northeast coast. The slower Hwy-1 travels adjacent to I-95 before branching inland at Jacksonville. However,

Visiting Daytona Beach

Daytona Beach is home to the Daytona International Speedway (*www.daytonainternationalspeedway.com*) and it's impossible to find accommodation in or around this town during Speed Weeks, which culminate in the Daytona 500 stock car race in February, Bike Week (*www.bikerbeach.com*) in March, Coke Zero 400 weekend in early July and Biketoberfest (*www.biketoberfest.org*) in October. But Daytona Beach organises Spring Family Beach Break each year between mid-March and May to encourage holidaying families to the area – at this time you'll get discounts at hotels, sights, restaurants and shops (*1 866 845 1993* or visit *www.familybeachbreak.com* for more information).

St John's River Ferry

Anyone driving SR-A1A along the northeast coast of Florida will take the St John's River car ferry (***www.stjohnsriverferry.com***) over the river between St. George's Island and Mayport, just north of Jacksonville Beach. Ferries operate every 15 minutes in alternate directions from 6am to 7pm Monday to Friday, 7am to 8:30pm Saturday and Sunday. US$5 fare per car in cash.

by far the most pleasant route is the SR-A1A, which winds along the coast.

Arriving

By Plane Jacksonville International Airport (*904 741 4902, **www.jia.aero***) is located 12 miles north of the city's downtown. This airport is the northeast's largest and receives regular flights from Miami, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale, operated by various American airlines.

By Car The quickest route to the central east coast from Orlando is via SR-528 (Bee Line Expressway) to I-95, the main interstate running the length of the east coast.

However, if you're headed for the northeast take I-4, which joins I-95 at Daytona Beach after an hour's drive.

The most direct route from the Panhandle (see Chapter 9) is via I-10, which joins I-95 at Jacksonville.

GETTING AROUND

With limited public transport options, the only feasible way to travel around the north and central east coast with children is by car. For details of car hire, see p. 31.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Child-Friendly Festivals & Events

Butterfly Fest

*Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, 352 846 2000, **www.flmnh.ufl.edu/butterflyfest**.*

Organised by the Florida Museum of Natural History (see p. 163), Gainesville's annual Butterfly Fest is held in late October and promises a 'wonderful weekend of wing-flapping fun'. The festival centres around the museum's superb Butterfly Rainforest and includes arts and crafts activities where children can make their own butterfly wings, face painting and a Butterfly Parade.

Cocoa Beach Air Show

*Cocoa Beach, 1 800 514 3849, **www.cocoabeachairshow.com**.*

All eyes in Cocoa Beach look upwards at the end of October as its spectacular annual air show

blazes across the sky. Performers include the US Air Force Thunderbirds and civilian air show teams flying vintage craft. Anyone can view the show for free from the beach, but prime viewing spots are cordoned off and require a ticket to access. Ticket prices include the use of beach chairs and a children's inflatable area.

Adm *1-day tickets US$20, 2-day tickets US$30.*

Ron Jon's Easter Surf Festival

Cocoa Beach *321 799 8888,* ***www.eastersurffest.com****.*

Every Easter Ron Jon's Surf Shop (see p. 169) organises a vast surfing festival that takes Cocoa Beach by storm. This veteran event showcases world-championship surfers, aged 12 to 80, who compete in a variety of events over the weekend. A food court springs up on the edge of the beach and visitors watch surfing demonstrations and take part in an Easter Egg hunt. Check the website for exact dates.

Adm *Free.*

Children's Top Five Attractions

1. **Getting** to see the track at the Daytona 500 Experience; p. 163.
2. **Exploring** St. Augustine's historic streets; p. 155.
3. **Learning** about the care of sick sea turtles at the Marine Science Center; p. 164.
4. **Gazing** at the 'Wall of Wings' inside the Florida Museum of Natural History: p. 163.
5. **Cycling** on wide, wild Fernandina Beach; p. 161.

Towns & Cities

Gainesville ★

www.visitgainesville.com*.*

Although this appealing city is an easy day trip from Orlando, any family seeking an authentic, inexpensive experience of Florida should consider spending 2 or 3 days discovering everything Gainesville has to offer. Home to one of America's largest universities – the University of Florida – the student population infuses the city with an upbeat vibe that perfectly compliments the more sedate, picturesque, historic side of town. If you're here on a day trip, make the attractions at the university's Cultural Plaza and Santa Fe College a priority (see box, p. 153). However, Gainesville is famously the city where 'nature and culture meet' and the other main draw here is the many different ways of getting up close to Florida's abundant wildlife. The main natural and historic attraction is the Morningside Nature Center (see p. 164), but also make time to visit **Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park** (100 Savannah Boulevard, *352 466 3397,* ***www.floridastateparks.org/paynesprairie****,* open 8am–sunset. US$6 per car) on the southeast outskirts of town. Here you can follow walking trails or climb a

FUN FACT Solar Walk

The mile-long Solar Walk on Gainesville's NW 8th Avenue features monuments to the planets in the solar system. All are made from recycled materials and show the planets to scale both in size and distance from the sun.

50-foot high observation tower and take in sweeping views of the park's 21,000-acre savannah where wild horses, deer and bison roam. For a very different experience of Florida's great outdoors, head southwest from downtown Gainesville to the **Kanapaha Botanical Gardens** AGE 1 & UP (4700 South West Archer Road – SR-24 – *352 372 4981, www.kanapaha.org*, open 9am–5pm Mon–Wed & Fri, 9am–sunset Sat & Sun, US$5, US$3 children aged 1–13) to explore a labyrinth of different gardens, the highlight of which for children is undoubtedly the giant lily pads.

Gainesville's best family-friendly eating options include **Satchel's** (see p. 172) and the **Fat Tuscan** at the corner of NE 8th Avenue and 1st Street (*352 505 5648, http://fattuscan.com*, open from 11am).

Jacksonville

www.downtownjacksonville.org. South of the border with Georgia by 25 miles and spliced through the middle by the St John's river, Jacksonville is Florida's largest city by land mass. Its prosperity grew through proximity to both river and railway, and Jacksonville claims the largest deep-water port in the south. Gleaming skyscrapers housing banking and insurance giants characterise Jacksonville's cityscape and the main reason to bring your children into its glistening downtown is to relish its young, upbeat vibe and rich culture.

Divided by the St John's river, there are two sides to downtown Jacksonville – the north and south banks. Most visitors make **Jacksonville Landing** (*904 353 1188, www.jacksonvillelanding.com*) their first stop. This is a snazzy two-storey waterfront semi-circle of shops, bars and restaurants on the north side of the river. Just north of Main Street Bridge, this complex is a convenient place to park and has a visitor information centre (see p. 149). It's also a good place to eat in the city, as there's an inexpensive food court containing Mexican, Thai and

FUN FACT Movie Town

Jacksonville was the 'Hollywood' of the silent film era. Over 300 silent films were made in the city in the early 1900s.

The Cultural Plaza & Santa Fe College Attractions

The University of Florida's Cultural Plaza (*http://culturalplaza.edu*, parking US$4) located on campus at the corner of SW 34th Street and Hull Road, contains two first-class family-friendly attractions – the **Florida Museum of Natural History** (see p. 163) and the **Harn Museum of Art** AGE 10 & UP (*352 392 9826, www.harn.ufl.edu,* open 11am–5pm Tues–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 1–5pm Sun, free), where world-class collections showcase African, Asian and contemporary art and photography. North of the university is **Gainesville's Santa Fe College** (3000 NW 83rd Street, *www.sfcollege.edu*, free parking), where the campus contains a **Teaching Zoo** AGE 4 & UP (*352 395 5604, www.sfcollege.edu/zoo*, open 9am–2pm, US$5, US$4 children aged 4–12), in which students learn how to be zoo keepers and visitors get to tour the collection of 200 animals, which includes the too-cute-to-be-true Matschie tree kangaroo. While, the college's **Planetarium** AGE 5 & UP (*352 395 5225, www.sfcollege.edu/planetarium*, US$5, US$4 children aged 4–12, under 4s free) runs a regular programme of immersive public shows on Friday evenings at 7pm and Saturdays at 3pm, 5pm and 7pm.

pizza outlets on the second floor and a range of moderately priced restaurants such as **Benny's Steak & Seafood Restaurant** (*904 301 1014)* at water level, all with stunning views of the St John's river and its many bridges.

Also on the north side of the river, just south of I-95, is the **Cummer Museum of Art** (see p. 165), the most impressive of the city's numerous art galleries. Jacksonville's downtown contains a cluster of galleries; to explore more pick up a map detailing the city's Art Walk from the visitor information centre (see p. 149). Many of the galleries are within walking distance of Jacksonville Landing – don't miss the **Museum of Contemporary Art** AGE 8 & UP (333 North Laura Street, *904 366 6911, www.mocajacksonville.org*. Open 10am–4pm Tues, Wed, Fri & Sat, 10am–8pm Thurs, noon–4pm Sun, US$8 adults, US$5 students, under 2s free), where the collections of work from the 1960s to the present day are accessible to children. Close to the museum is the **Chamlin second-hand bookstore** (4551 Roosevelt Blvd, *904 384 1685, www.chamblinbookmine.com*, open 10am–6pm Mon–Sat), which contains a friendly café that serves hearty breakfast fare and inexpensive lunchtime wraps plus a children's menu that includes peanut butter and jam on wheat bread for US$2. Alternatively try

the **Adams St. Deli & Grill** (126 W Adams Street, *904 475 1400*, open 11am–3pm Mon–Fri), where white-collar workers flock at lunchtimes for freshly prepared wraps, salads, sandwiches and homemade soups.

INSIDER TIP

Other than walking across Main Street Bridge, there are two ways to cross the St John's river in downtown Jacksonville. The Skyway monorail (*904 630 3191*, open 6am–9pm Mon–Fri, US$50) glides between Central Station on the north bank and San Marco Station close to the Museum of Science & History (see p. 166) on the south side and provides an elevated view of the city. Or cross at water level on a river taxi that operates between Jacksonville Landing and the south bank (*904 733 7782*, 11am–9pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–1pm Fri & Sat, US$3 adults, US$2 children, under 3s free).

In contrast to the skyscrapers and cultural museums of the downtown area, the south bank of St John's river is a more low-key affair – listen out for the sound of the goods trains as they lumber through town. Attractions here cluster around a picturesque riverside walk that winds beside the massive **Friendship Fountain** and the **Museum of Science & History** (see p. 166), which is the main draw to this side of the river. However, also on the south side you'll find the small **Jacksonville Maritime Museum** AGE 10 & UP (1015 Museum Circle, *904 398 9011, www.jaxmaritimemuseum.org*, open 10:30am–3pm Mon–Fri, 1–5pm Sat & Sun, free) and the **River City Brewing Company** (see p. 171), one of the best places in the city to eat.

For information on **Jacksonville Beach,** see p. 162.

INSIDER TIP

Two useful websites for families visiting Jacksonville are *www.jax4kids.com* and *www.jaxkidsdirectory.com*.

Jacksonville

FUN FACT **Saint's Feast Day**

Pedro Menendez de Avilés named his settlement after St. Augustine because he first sighted land on 28th August, the saint's feast day.

St. Augustine ★★★

On 8th September 1565, 55 years before the pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, Pedro Menendez de Avilés landed with a group of Spanish settlers at the place he named St. Augustine. Unlike other early settlements, St. Augustine survived to become the oldest continually occupied European settlement in North America.

Thirty-seven miles south of Jacksonville and a 2-hour drive from Orlando, St. Augustine is perfect for any British family that enjoys visiting historic sites. You can easily spend a couple of days delving into the heritage of Florida's most charming city – longer if you want to combine spending time on its beaches. There's so much history here that St. Augustine feels like one big museum and wandering around the Mediterranean-style streets of its compact historic downtown is enjoyable for all ages.

INSIDER TIP

The best place to park in St. Augustine is the car park behind the visitor information centre on Castillo Drive (US$1.25 per hour or US$7.50 per day).

Pass through the **old city gates** at the south end of San Marco Avenue into pedestrianised St. George Street, the spine of the historic district. A number of attractions lead off this street, including the quaint **Oldest Wooden School House** AGE 6 & UP (14 St. George Street, *904 824 0192, www.oldestwoodenschoolhouse.com*, open 9am–5pm daily, US$3 adults, US$2 children, time 15 minutes), which taught its last class in 1864; the **Peña-Peck House** AGE 6 & UP

The Oldest Wooden School House, St. Augustine

Tours of St. Augustine

A great way for children to learn about St. Augustine's history is on one of its colourful sightseeing trains. The **Old Town Trolley Tours** AGE 5 & UP (*904 829 3800, www.trolleytours.com*, 8:30am–4:30pm, US$23, US$10 children aged 6–12, under 6s free) can be picked up at numerous stops downtown or depart from the **Old Town Jail** (see p. 159) on San Marcos Avenue where parking is provided. Tickets are valid for 3 days and the narrated journey makes about 20 stops around town. Hop on and off, or sit back and do the whole trip in one go.

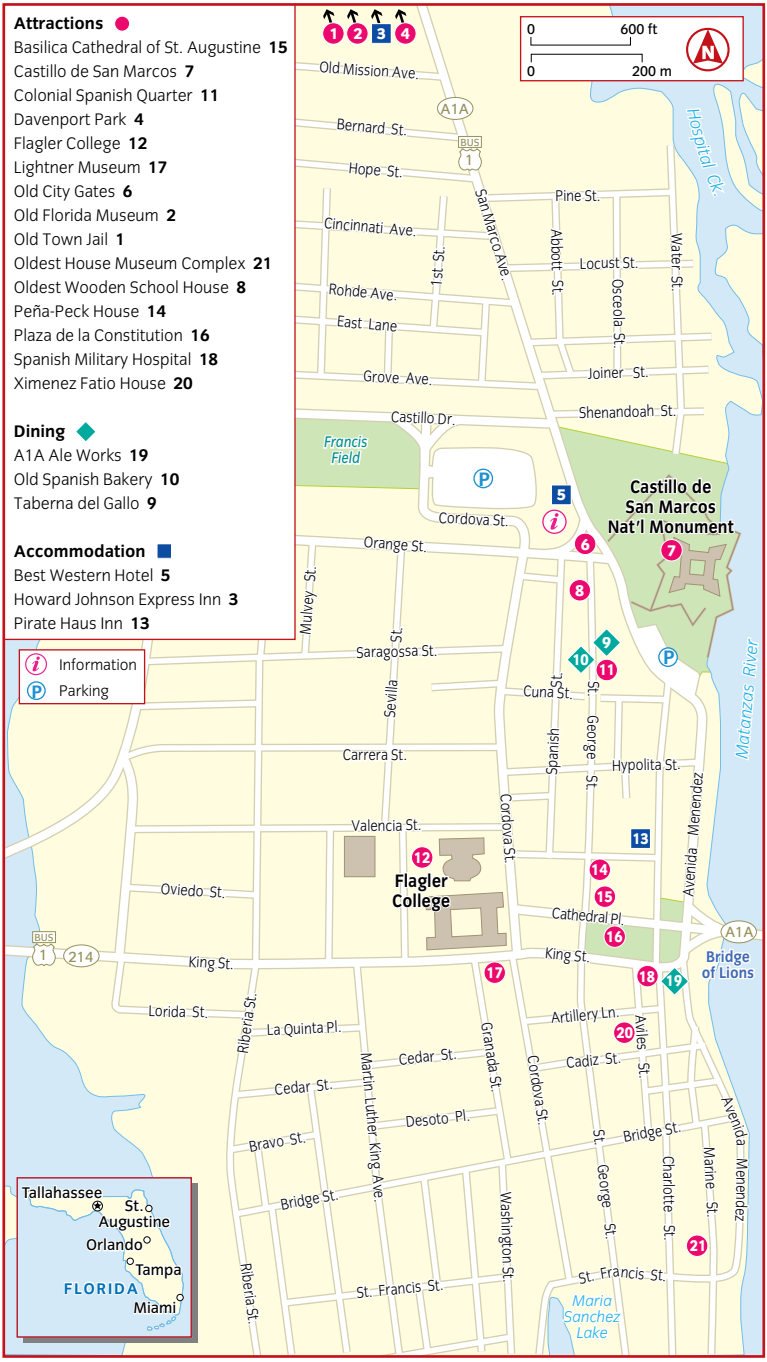
Ghost Tours of St. Augustine AGE 12 & UP (*904 461 1009, www.ghosttoursofstaugustine.com*) offer evening walking tours (US$12 per person), trolley tours (US$22 per person) and sailing tours (US$35 per person), which take visitors deep into the city's spookiest corners.

One of the most relaxing ways to tour is by horse-drawn carriage; these depart from the waterfront near the **Castillo de San Marcos** (*904 829 2391, www.staugustinetransfer.com*, from 10am, US$20, US$10 children aged 5–11).

(143 St. George Street, *904 829 5064*, open 10:30am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun, free, time 15 minutes), a restored 1740s' house built for the Spanish Royal Treasurer, and, best for children, the Colonial Spanish Quarter (see p. 159). On this street the **Old Spanish Bakery** is a good choice for lunch, as its meat pies, turnovers, cinnamon rolls and inexpensive soups are hearty and tasty (42 St. George Street, *904 471 3046, www.thespanishbakery.com*, open daily 9:30am–3pm). Also make time to visit the **Taberna del Gallo** (35 St. George Street, *904 825 6830*, open noon–5:15pm Wed & Thurs, noon–9pm Fri & Sat,

Jump on board the Old Town Trolley Tour

ST. AUGUSTINE



1–5:15pm Sun), a 1740s' Spanish tavern where draft beer and sangria flow by candlelight.

At the point where St. George Street meets King Street, St. Augustine's architecture changes to a Spanish colonial style. Turn east and you'll enter the wide **Plaza de la Constitution;** pop into the **Basilica Cathedral of St. Augustine** to view its beautiful stained glass. Heading west, away from the plaza, you'll encounter two of St. Augustine's most impressive buildings, the **Lightner Museum** (see p. 166) and imposing **Flagler College.** Once an exclusive winter hotel, visitors can enter the college's main building, which boasts exquisite Tiffany stained glass and an intricate painted ceiling.

INSIDER TIP

If you are travelling with small children, pay a visit to **Davenport Park** at the corner of SR-A1A and San Marcos Avenue. This small park features an old-fashioned carousel (US$1), children's playground and picnic tables.

Many visitors don't explore St. George Street any further south than King Street – but persevere because the streets of this quiet end of town are one of the few places in Florida where it's safe to wander away from the main road and delight in discovering shady courtyards and tiny lanes dripping with Spanish moss.

Here you can get a feel for how people lived in 18th-century St. Augustine at the **Oldest House Museum Complex** AGE 8 & UP (14 St Francis Street, *904 824 2872, www.oldesthouse.org*, open 9am–5pm daily, US$8 adults, US$4 children aged 6–18, under 6s free, time 1 hour), which features the oldest-surviving Spanish colonial house in Florida, two museums and charming oriental gardens.

And on Aviles Street, **Ximenez Fatio House** AGE 6 & UP (20 Aviles Street, *904 829 3575,* 11am–4pm Tues–Sat, US$5 adults, US$4 children aged 6–17, under 6s free, time 15 minutes) is an old Spanish merchant's house built in 1789, and the **Spanish Military Hospital** AGE 6 & UP (3 Aviles Street, *904 825 6830, www.spanishmilitaryhospital.com*, open 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun, US$3 adults, US$2 children, time 15 minutes) lets visitors view the grim health care of centuries past.

Best Beaches & Beach Communities

Cocoa Beach

www.visitcocoabeach.com.

Orlando's closest beach and neighbour to the **Kennedy Space Center** (see p. 80), Cocoa Beach is the east coast's chilled-out surf capital, whose laid-back vibe has a genuinely family-friendly appeal. Cocoa's ramshackle old pier is a veritable institution and forms the beach's focal point. Its battered wooden boardwalk provides glorious views over the surfer-filled waves and is home to numerous shops, restaurants and bars serving a

FUN FACT **Surfing**

The ancient Polynesians invented surfing sometime between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1000.

range of seafood and burgers, some with children's menus.

Cocoa is an active beach with plenty of beach volleyball courts and is well suited to families who like company or want to sit back and watch surfers hone their skills. If watching isn't enough, **Cocoa Beach Surf Company** (*www.cocoabeachsurf.com*), adjacent to Fort Points by the Sheraton resort, rents boards from US$5 for 2 hours and organises surf lessons and camps for all ages.

Make time to venture away from the sand to discover **Cocoa Village** FIND (*www.cocoavillage.com*), a small grid of charming tree-lined streets due west of the beach, filled with unusual shops and family-friendly eating options.

Daytona Beach ★★★

Daytona Beach is proud to be the world's most famous beach and the birthplace of speed. Before the opening of the International Speedway in 1959 (see

St. Augustine's Family-Friendly Historic Sights

There are many historic sites in St. Augustine that will engage your children as well as **Castillo de San Marcos** (see p. 167).

The **Colonial Spanish Quarter** ★★ AGE 6 & UP (33 St. George Street, *904 825 6830, www.historicstaugustine.com*, open 9am–4:45pm daily, US$7 adults, US$5 children, time 1 hour) consists of a number of recreated old buildings. This working museum is brought alive by costumed actors demonstrating how people lived in early St. Augustine.

At the time of writing the **Old Florida Museum** ★ (254 San Marco Avenue, *904 824 8874, www.oldfloridamuseum.com*, open 10am–5pm daily, US$10 adults, US$9 children), where children can have fun with history and get stuck into the likes of pumping water, playing with hoops and grinding corn, is undergoing a major construction project. During this time tours are offered on a limited basis.

The **Old Town Jail** AGE 6 & UP (167 San Marco Avenue, *904 829 3800*, open 9:30am–5pm daily, US$6 adults, US$4 children, time 1 hour) highlights the grizzlier side of St. Augustine's history. Visitors view maximum security and solitary confinement cells along with the old jailers' living quarters. Admission to the adjacent Florida Heritage Museum is free with tickets to the Old Jail.

FUN FACT **Land Speed Record**

In 1935 Malcolm Campbell set the world land speed record at 276 mph in his Rolls-Royce-powered *Bluebird* on Daytona Beach.

the Daytona 500 Experience p. 163), all kinds of 'horse-less carriages' raced on its 23 miles of hard-packed sand and today cars are still allowed onto large areas of the beach.

INSIDER TIP

Take care on Daytona Beach. Although speed limits are very low on the beach and motorists are advised to watch out for pedestrians, it is not unheard of for people, especially children, to be injured, and on rare occasions killed, by cars on the sand.

Daytona is everything you'd expect from a developed beach, with clusters of arcades and rides around its pier. **Daytona Lagoon** (*386 254 5020, www.daytonalagoon.com*) is an entertainment complex complete with go-karts, miniature golf and a small water park. While Ocean Walk is a brightly coloured complex of shops, restaurants and a 10-screen cinema on Daytona's waterfront.

However, Daytona, which is far from the party beach it once was, has another side characterised by the likes of the old-fashioned Beach Street, home to antique stores, galleries and a large magic shop. Also on this street chocoholics will discover confectionery heaven at **Angell & Phelps Chocolate Factory** (*386 257 2677, www.angellandphelps.com*), where visitors can learn how chocolate is made courtesy of a free factory tour (Mon–Fri only) and try a free sample or two of the divine chocolate that has been handmade here since 1925.

INSIDER TIP

Daytona's Jackie Robinson Ballpark on E Orange Avenue is a great place for families to watch Minor League baseball games. Matches take place most evenings from April to September and tickets cost US$7, US$6 children aged 13 and under (*386 257 3172* or visit *www.daytonacubs.com* for full details and to book tickets). See p. 42 for more information on watching a baseball game in Florida.

Away from its beach, Daytona is home to a collection of cultural attractions including the excellent **Museum of Arts & Sciences** (see p. 166) and the **Museum of Photography** AGE 12 & UP (*386 506 4475, www.smponline.org*). Housed in the Daytona Beach Community College on International Speedway Boulevard, this hosts world-class photography exhibitions and children can learn about the science of photography through optical illusions, kaleidoscopes and activity sheets.

Families with small children can seek out Ponce Inlet, just south of Daytona Beach, which has a quiet beach and play area and two good family-friendly eating options (see p. 170). Here you can also climb the tower of the **Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse** AGE 5 & UP (*386 761 1821, www.ponceinlet.org*, open daily 10am–6pm, US$5 adults, US$1.50 children aged 11 and under), Florida's tallest lighthouse, to enjoy views over the east coast and visit the **Marine Science Center** (see p. 164).

Fernandina Beach ★★★

Tucked away under the border with Georgia, Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island is rarely visited by European tourists. Proud to be undeveloped, this community is characterised by wooden sea-facing houses and manages to combine the ambience of New England with the laid-back charm of the Caribbean – this is a safe and welcoming place to bring children.

Washed by the Atlantic, Fernandina's wide, wild beach is never crowded and the park by its main entrance, with volleyball courts and picnic tables, is a favourite with local and visiting families.

Fernandina has plenty to keep children occupied, with attractions like **Fort Clinch** (see p. 167), the off-road cycling path along **Egan's Creek Greenway** (see p. 167) and the beach itself. And no visit is complete without exploring the historic downtown, characterised by late-Victorian architecture and an old railroad – you'll hear the lumber trains, which carry wood for the paper mills, blasting their horns from miles away.

INSIDER TIP

A favourite game for children is to count the number of wagons that make up the lumber trains, which trundle through town.

Overlooking the Amelia river, a marina forms the hub of Fernandina's downtown, from which **Amelia River Cruises** AGE 5 & UP (*904 261 9972, www.ameliarivercruises.com*, US$20–US$26, US$14–US$20 children aged 12 and under) operate a variety of daily boat trips around the region's waterways. **Polly the Trolley,** a tourist sightseeing trolley (*904 753 4486*, US$15), departs on tours of downtown during the day and ghost tours of the area in the evening.

Situated close to the marina, **Fernandina's visitor information centre** is housed in an old station building (*904 277 0717, www.ameliaisland.org*, open 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) at the top of Center Street, downtown's main road, which is bursting with eclectic bookshops, boutiques, arts and crafts shops and great cafés. I recommend grabbing a Cuban snack at **Angel's Porch Cafe** (708 Center Street, *904 321 2299*, open 11am–4pm Mon–Tues and

11am–9pm Wed–Sat), which serves inexpensive food on a rustic porch crammed with plants.

Flagler Beach ★ FIND

To experience a slice of the wild, undeveloped side of Florida's northeast coast, head 25 miles north of Daytona to Flagler Beach. An old fishing pier stands at the centre of this tiny community where beach parking, picnic shelters, cafés and surf shops line the A1A as it passes along the edge of the beach. There is little to please action-seeking teenagers here, but Flagler's uncrowded sands, stunning sunrises and rustic laid-back atmosphere will appeal to families seeking a stress-free, old-fashioned seaside experience.

Jacksonville Beach

www.jaxcvb.com.

Jacksonville Beach is the tourist-focused area of a 15-mile strip of coastline east of Jacksonville. This stretch of sand has all the young vibe of the city's downtown and is populated with athletic locals who come to play volleyball, surf and jog. Families with teenagers who like to kick a ball around or play Frisbee will enjoy this lively, upbeat beach.

INSIDER TIP

Jacksonville Beach is popular with spring breakers, so is not suitable for families at this time.

Day-trippers park on the corner of 4th Avenue and 1st Street at the foot of a busy pier (open 6am–7pm US$1 per pedestrian), which is the focal point of all activity. Here beachwear, souvenir and surf shops spill onto a walkway edging the beach. For cycle hire try Champion Cycle (1303 North 3rd Street, *904 241 0900*, *www.championcycling.net*, US$7 per hour or US$20 per day) or Cycle Spectrum (1124 North 3rd Street, *904 246 4977*, *www.cyclespectrum.com*).

Another draw to Jacksonville Beach for lively children is **Adventure Landing** AGE 6 & UP (1944 Beach Boulevard (Hwy-90), *904 246 4386*, *www.adventurelanding.com*, open 10am–10pm Sun–Thurs, 10am–midnight Fri & Sat, time 2 hours). Here you'll find pay-as-you-go activities including go-carts, miniature golf, laser tag and a water park, which is open in the summer. If you're looking for a quieter beach head a few miles north to **Kathryn Abbey Hanna Park** (500 Wonderwood Drive, *904 249 4700*, open daily 8am–8pm Apr–Oct and 8am–6pm Nov–Mar, US$3 per car). Just south of Mayport and ideal for small children, this secluded park has an unspoilt beach, freshwater lake with a water play area, woodland trails and picnic tables.

INSIDER TIP

A bus service that connects Jacksonville Beach with downtown Jacksonville is the BH1. Fares are US$1 per journey (*www.jtafla.com*).

Top Family Attractions

Daytona 500 Experience

★★★ AGE 5 & UP

1801 International Speedway, Daytona Beach, 386 947 6800, www.daytona500experience.com.

The Daytona 500 – 'the Great American Race' – and stock car racing in general is integral to the culture of the southern US. A visit to the Daytona 500 Experience – the visitor attraction located at the city's world-famous International Speedway – is as much about learning about the history of this iconic race and the sport it represents as it is about getting up close to fast cars and the men who risk their lives driving them.

Allow at least half a day to experience everything here, especially if you have older children who'll want to try out Acceleration Alley, where they get to sit in a racing car and drive a video simulation of the Daytona 500. A visit also includes an IMAX 3D film covering the history of NASCAR from its beginnings as a race dominated by whiskey runners from the Appalachians during the prohibition era, to the multi-million dollar business it is today.

There's also a museum featuring winning stock cars and photographs of the original races on Daytona Beach, and the *Bluebird*, which set land speed records on these very sands.

Nothing beats getting out onto the track itself, and a speedway tour takes you behind the scenes of one of the world's biggest speedways. The tour includes privileged views of the track's famous steeply angled curves, around which drivers must maintain a speed of 95mph or lose the battle with gravity and get sucked to the bottom of the track. For an extra US$135 a professional driver will whizz you around the track in a stock car at 160 mph.

Time *3 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–6pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$25, US$20 children aged 6–12, under 6s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

To book tickets to a race at Daytona International Speedway, see *www.racetickets.com*.

Florida Museum of Natural History

★ AGE 5 & UP

University of Florida Cultural Plaza, SW 34th Street & Hull Road, Gainesville, 352 846 2000, www.flmnh.ufl.edu.

Standing at the heart of Gainesville's Cultural Plaza, this excellent museum makes discovering Florida's natural history both fun and educational. A collection of first-class permanent exhibits takes visitors on a journey through south Florida's Neolithic history, the story of its native people and the ecology of the region's beaches and marine life – don't miss the impressive collection of shark jaws. It's well worth the admission charge to enter the Butterfly Rainforest where you can wander through lush tropical gardens and get up close to hundreds of butterflies. Make time to gaze upon the

'Wall of Wings', a huge display, nearly three storeys high, showcasing around 13,000 different species of butterflies and moths. And, if you're lucky, you can watch a new-born butterfly emerge from one of the hundreds of chrysalis that arrive at the museum every week from around the world.

Time *1–2 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–5pm Mon–Sat, 1–5pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *General admission is free, Butterfly Rainforest US$10, US$5 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens

★ AGE 3 & UP

370 Zoo Parkway, Jacksonville, 904 757 4463, www.jaxzoo.org.

Situated halfway between Jacksonville's downtown and airport, the animals in this zoo are housed in a series of environmentally sensitive natural habitats. Each showcases species from a different part of the world; the African area is complete with elephant pool, cheetahs and giraffes, while the Inca-themed rainforest is home to South American animals from the jaguar to anaconda. Small children enjoy the mazes and water pools at the play park, where they can watch playful otters swimming close by. The daily Keeper Talks, which are a fascinating way to learn more about the zoo's animals, are more frequent at weekends.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$13, US$8 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Marine Science Center

★★ AGE 5 & UP

100 Lighthouse Drive, Ponce Inlet, 306 304 5545, www.marinesciencecenter.com.

This brilliant organisation aims to increase understanding of Florida's diverse ecosystems and wildlife, and the conservation and rehabilitation programmes in place to help protect them. Volunteer staff members encourage children to ask questions as they view turtles housed in rehabilitation pools, and there's information on hand detailing their chances of survival – have a few tissues handy! The centre features an artificial reef aquarium and an accessible nature trail leading to a bird-watching tower. A bird sanctuary is located across the car park – go to view injured pelicans, wood storks, owls and hawks as they recover.

Time *1–2 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–4pm Tues–Sat, noon–4pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$, US$2 children aged 5–12, under 5s free.* ***Amenities***

Morningside Nature Center & Living History Museum

★ AGE 5 & UP

3540 East University Avenue, Gainesville, 352 334 2171, www.natureoperations.org.

Step back in time and deep into south Florida's pine woodlands at this off-the-beaten-track attraction. The Nature Center consists of hundreds of acres of native trees and vegetation laced with miles of walking trails that light up with a blaze of

wildflowers in autumn and from which the likes of deer, racoons, wild turkeys, bob cats and quail can be spied. Located here is a Living History Museum where visitors can experience first hand farming life in south Florida in the late 19th century. Explore a carefully restored old farm house, where the Hogan family brought up six children and melt-in-the-mouth cookies are still baked in the old kitchen. Best of all for young children is the farm's collection of American historic and rare breeds from this era, including Penny the Jersey cow, Dominique chickens and Rhett the ram from Alabama – feeding time is 3pm. There's no café, but this is an ideal spot for a picnic.

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *free.* ***Amenities***

Silver Springs AGE 3 & UP

5656 East Silver Springs Boulevard, Silver Springs, 352 236 2121, www.silversprings.com.

Planned around a large artesian spring, this lush park is an appealing mix of nature and rides. Peer into the abundant crystal-clear springs on a glass-bottomed boat ride, the park's main pull. Other attractions include a lighthouse ride where you can view the park and surrounds from an 80-foot high gondola, a wilderness jeep trail through native habitat and Kids Ahoy!, an adventure playland complete with slides, mini motor boats and a Ferris wheel. However, animals are the stars of the park and you can expect to encounter an array of birds, from ducks to hawks, at the 'Wings of the Springs' show, a showcase of rare and endangered bears, many different worldwide species of non-venomous snakes and, of course, alligators and crocodiles, including a rare white alligator known as the 'swamp ghost'.

Time *3–4 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$30, US$25 children aged 3–10, under 3s free.* ***Amenities***

Top Museums

Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens ★ AGE 5 & UP

829 Riverside Avenue, Jacksonville, 904 356 6857, www.cummer.org.

Marine Science Center

The Cummer Museum of Art is home to an impressive collection of work covering 8,000 years of art history. Highlights of the permanent exhibitions include work by the American Impressionists and a collection of Japanese wood block prints. The best section for youngsters is the Arts Connections building, which houses interactive exhibits designed to enhance an understanding of art. Here they can walk through a painting and listen to a sculpture. There are also two beautiful acres of English and Italian formal gardens to contemplate.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–4pm Wed–Fri, 10am–9pm Tues, 10am–5pm Sat, noon–5pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$10 adults, US$6 students, under 5s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Lightner Museum

★★ AGE 12 & UP

King Street, St. Augustine, 904 824 2874, www.lightnermuseum.org.

Built in 1888 as a luxury hotel, the three floors of the impressive Lightner Museum are filled with collections of exquisite 19th-century artefacts, including Tiffany glass, music boxes, costumes and mechanical musical instruments. This beautiful museum is more for older children, who'll probably get as much from walking around the stunning building as they will from the exhibits. Make time for a visit to the museum's café, housed in what was once the hotel's splendid swimming pool.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$10 adults, US$5 children aged 12–18, under 12s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Museum of Arts & Sciences

★★ AGE 5 & UP

352 S Nova Road, Daytona Beach, 386 255 0285, www.moas.org.

Situated halfway between Daytona's beach and speedway, this Smithsonian-affiliated museum is one of the best for children in Florida. The museum stands inside a large nature reserve, which contains walking trails, an environmental education complex and sensory garden. Inside the most child-friendly exhibition is the Americana collection, full of Coca-Cola memorabilia, vintage cars and train carriages plus a display of 800 teddy bears. Other highlights include the largest collection of Cuban art outside of Havana, donated by former dictator Fulgencio Batista. Admission includes entry to a planetarium show and a special children's museum housing interactive science exhibits for children aged 4 to 14.

Time *1–2 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm Tues–Sat, 11am–5pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$13 adults, US$7 children aged 6–17, under 6s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Museum of Science & History

★ AGE 3 & UP

1025 Museum Circle, Jacksonville, 904 396 6674, www.themosh.org.

Jacksonville's best attraction for families, the Museum of Science & History is an interactive children's museum with numerous displays and activities designed to encourage learning. There's plenty here to engage children who are into dinosaurs and other

highlights include the Atlantic Tails exhibit, where you can learn all about whales, dolphins and manatees, and the Body Within where visitors get to stroll through the digestive system. Admission includes a planetarium show.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat, 1pm–6pm Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$10, US$8 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

State Parks & Historic Sites

Castillo de San Marcos

★ AGE 5 & UP

1 Castillo Drive East, St. Augustine, 904 829 6506, www.nps.gov/casa.

One of Florida's most important national monuments, the impressive star-shaped Castillo de San Marcos fort was built by the Spanish in the late 17th century to protect St. Augustine. The fort is made from coquina, a soft material made of seashells that can withstand cannonballs, and over the double drawbridge a self-guided tour leads through (haunted) prison cells, a chapel and guard rooms. Regular costumed events and demonstrations bring the fort's history to life, and children can pick up a free Junior Rangers activity book at the ticket booth – it's crammed with ideas to keep youngsters occupied during a visit.

Time *1–1½ hr.* ***Open*** *8:45am–5:15pm daily, ticket booth closes at 4:45pm.* ***Adm*** *US$6, children under 15 free if accompanied by an adult.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

The grounds around Castillo de San Marco overlook St. Augustine's waterfront and are a pleasant place for an evening's dolphin spotting and stroll.

Fort Clinch State Park AGE 5 & UP

2601 Atlantic Avenue, Fernandina Beach, 904 277 7274, www.floridastateparks.org/fortclinch.

Fort Clinch stands guard over Fernandina's natural deep-water port (see p. 161) at the northern end of Amelia Island and provides fabulous views out to sea from its battlements. The fort's interior has been recreated to show how it looked when occupied by soldiers in 1864 and the sleeping quarters, storehouse and kitchens are interesting to poke around. A guide in Civil War dress is present to answer visitors' questions and historical re-enactments take place the first weekend of each month. If your visit coincides, join an evening candlelit tour held on the first Saturday of the month (US$10 per person, reservations are essential via the number above). The surrounding grounds contain hiking and cycling trails and access to a quiet stretch of beach.

Time *30 min.* ***Open*** *Park 8am–sunset, fort 9am–4:30pm daily.* ***Adm*** *Park US$6 cars, US$2 cyclists and pedestrians; fort US$2, under 5s free.* ***Amenities***

For Active Families

Egans Creek Greenway

Winding through the green space behind Fernandina's coast

road (Fletcher Avenue), Egans Creek Greenway comprises a series of looping off-road cycling and hiking trails that are good to explore with small children, as they are flat. All kinds of birds and wildlife can be encountered on the Greenway – keep an eye open for alligators – and paths can be accessed from Jasmine Street or Atlantic Avenue, where you can also join the quiet road leading to **Fort Clinch** (see p. 167). Bikes can be rented from **Beach Rentals & More** (2856 Sadler Road at Fletcher Avenue, *904 310 6124, www.beachrentalsandmore.com*), who rent trailers for children and offer discounts for families.

Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge ★★

Four miles east of Titusville on SR-402, 321 861 2377, www.merrittislandwildlife.org.

Sharing a border with the **Kennedy Space Center** (see p. 80), the various ecosystems of this large, undeveloped wildlife refuge – the second-largest wildlife preserve in Florida after the Everglades – are teeming with around 500 species of wildlife, including dolphins, sea turtles, otters and bob cats. Children who love wildlife will enjoy the opportunities the refuge provides to witness many different animals. The visitor centre provides free maps and the refuge can be explored by foot on one of the walking trails – don't miss the Manatee Observation Deck – or via a 6-mile drive past salt and freshwater marshes. Like **the Everglades** (see p. 239), the beauty of this terrain is not immediately striking, but the minute you see a large flock of migratory birds take to the skies, you'll know what all the fuss is about.

Open *8am–4:30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm Sat, 9am–5pm Sun, Nov–Mar.*

Ocala National Forest ★★

904 942 9300, www.stateparks.com/ocala.

Inland from Ormond Beach along SR-40 and northwest of Orlando, Ocala National Forest is a vast untamed wildlife refuge, crossed by hiking trails and spring-fed rivers where the waters are delicious on a hot day. This is a great place for families to canoe together, as the waters are calm; outlets rent double canoes that accommodate an adult and child.

At Alexander Springs (8am–8pm, US$8 per car) off SR-19, visitors can swim and snorkel in crystal-clear spring water, explore a mile-long interpretive trail through palm, cedar and cypress swamps and rent canoes. Further north, Juniper Springs (8am–8pm, US$8 per car), off SR-40, west of SR-19, has a spring-fed swimming area where racoons keep an eye on visitors, and the canoe rental shop will drop canoeists 7 miles downriver to paddle back to the centre – last drop off is at noon.

INSIDER TIP

There are very few petrol stations in Ocala National Forest, so fill up before you enter.

Shopping

Ron Jon's Surf Shop ★

4151 N Atlantic Avenue, 1 888 757 8737, www.ronjons.com.

Just like the beach, Cocoa's enormous store, dedicated to all things surf, never closes. Two million visitors pass through Ron Jon's doors every year to browse through its two floors of clothes, accessories, beach gear and, of course, surfboards. This shop is a big hit with teens and older children looking for a trendy beach outfit, and is a good place to shop for wacky souvenirs – flip-flop soap anyone?

***Open** 24 hours. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** P*

The Dinosaur Store ★★

250 W Cocoa Beach Causeway (SR-520), 321 783 7300, www.dinosaustore.com.

Advertising itself as 'a Jurassic shopping experience', The Dinosaur Store is an Aladdin's cave for any child interested in these prehistoric giants. The shop's shelves and glass cabinets are cluttered with fossils, dinosaur teeth and claws, rocks, minerals and bones – a dinosaur skull will set you back US$48,000. There's also a good range of T-shirts, books and educational games.

***Open** 10am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat, noon–5pm Sun. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** P*

Other good shopping in northeast Florida includes St. Augustine's old Spanish Quarter where visitors can pick up a host of gifts and souvenirs, including Spanish pottery, fine jewellery, handmade chocolates and first-class wines. And downtown Jacksonville's Hemming Plaza Market (117 W Duval Street, 10am–2pm Fri) whose vendors sell everything from fresh flowers to handmade jewellery.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

A1A Ale Works ★

1 King Street, St. Augustine, 904 829 2977, www.a1aaleworks.com.

Families love this friendly restaurant-cum-pub, where the lively atmosphere is welcoming to children. Try to grab a table on the less crowded outside balcony facing the waterfront, an ideal spot from which to watch the decorated horse-drawn carriages plying their trade. The lunch and dinner menu is long and varied and, while seafood heavy, also features a decent range of sandwiches, pasta and lots of appetisers for smaller appetites. This has to be the only restaurant I've ever seen with seared tuna and fried custard on the same menu.

***Open** 11am–11:30pm Sun–Thurs, 11am–midnight Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$8–US$25. **Credit** AE, MC, V.*

Joe's 2nd Street Bistro ★★★

14 S 2nd Street, Fernandina Beach, 904 321 2558, www.joesbistro.com.

A1A Ale Works

Deep in the heart of Fernandina Beach's historic downtown, Joe's 2nd Street Bistro is a good choice for families who don't want to eat at the beach. You can choose to sit in a charming New Orleans-inspired courtyard decorated with an ornate fountain and tropical plants, or inside an old restored house but, if you can, get a table on the covered front porch, which has glorious views of Fernandina's waterways just as the sun sets over them. What stands out for me is the fabulous food, influenced by flavours from all over the world. The pasta and mainly meat and seafood main courses are truly memorable; just make sure you leave room for dessert. Reservations recommended.

Open *6–9:30pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *US$14–US$30.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

MODERATE

Lighthouse Landing Restaurant ★

4940 South Peninsular Drive, Ponce Inlet, Near Daytona Beach, 386 761 9271, ***www.lighthouselandingrestaurant.com****.*

The sign outside reads 'if you have a reservation you're in the wrong place', which sums up the deliberately downbeat ambience that the owners of this rustic waterfront restaurant are proud to uphold. Lighthouse Landing claims to be the last old Florida fish camp and its battered wooden porch overlooking Ponce Inlet has all the aura of Florida's adventurous, pre-theme park past. You'll find no frills here and children can relax and run around while parents enjoy the amazing views. None of the food is processed and dishes on the predominantly seafood menu vary depending on what's in season.

Open *Daily at 11:30am, closing times vary.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$23.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

River City Brewing Company ★

835 Museum Circle, Jacksonville, 904 398 2299, ***www.rivercitybrew.com****.*

This popular waterfront restaurant commands sweeping views of the St John's River and downtown Jacksonville. You can choose to eat either inside, where large windows infuse the spacious interior with light, or on the outdoor, riverside deck. The menu is dominated by seafood, but also includes burgers, pasta, sandwiches and a large selection of salads, all of which are as good as the views. Make sure you peer through the large interior windows into the heart of the onsite brewery.

Open *11am–3pm lunch, 5–10pm dinner Mon–Sat, 10:30am–2:30pm brunch Sun.* ***Main Courses*** *Lunch US$7–US$13, dinner US$17–US$24.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.*

BUDGET/MODERATE

Dancing Avocado Kitchen ★

110 S Beach Street, Daytona Beach, 386 947 2022.

This colourful and friendly café come restaurant claims to be the place 'where herbivore and carnivore eat in harmony'. True to this claim the eclectic menu, which is heavy with burgers, burritos, chowders and salads, features inventive dishes that will satisfy both appetites. The very hungry can tuck into a Piggy Dave burger topped with melted cheddar jack cheese and crispy bacon, but be sure to leave room for a slice of southern chocolate pecan pie. Trivial Pursuit question cards are supplied on every table to keep you entertained while waiting for food.

Eating Out on Jacksonville Beach

A number of fast-food waterfront bars and restaurants jostle for attention around the pier area of Jacksonville Beach; the most popular is **Bukkets Ocean Front Grill** (*904 246 7701,* ***www.bukkets-baha.com***), who serve a range of inexpensive seafood, burgers and chicken dishes. For more choice head to the North Beach Village Plaza on the oceanside of the A1A between 14th and 15th Avenues. This small strip features **El Potro Mexican Restaurant** (*904 241 6910,* ***www.elpotrorestaurant.com***), **Matsu Japanese Steakhouse** (*904 249 4290*) and **Philly's Finest** (*904 241 7188,* ***www.phillys-finest.com***) for steaks, hoagies and pizzas. However, my favourite informal restaurant for families in this area is **Mellow Mushroom** (1018 North 3rd Street, *904 241 5600*, ***www.mellowmushroom.com***), where the range of hearty pizzas can be washed down with a glass of local beer.

St. Augustine

In contrast to most of Florida's coastal communities, many visitors to St. Augustine prefer to stay in its historic downtown where numerous accommodation options can be found. A string of chain motels is located at the north end of downtown where SR-A1A becomes San Marco Avenue, including the **Howard Johnson Express Inn** (137 San Marco Avenue, *904 824 6181, www.hojo.com*, rooms from US$60), which is literally on the tourist trail as tram tours stop here to visit the Old Senator, a 600-year-old oak tree in the middle of the motel's car park. Adjacent to the old Spanish Quarter is a 40-room **Best Western Hotel** (6 Castillo Drive, *904 824 4457, www.staugustinebestwestern.com*, rooms from US$80). St. Augustine has many fabulous B&Bs set in old houses in the historic district. The **St. Augustine Historic Inns'** website (*www.staugustineinns.com*) details all of these properties and their rates.

***Open** 8am–4pm Mon–Sat. **Main Courses** US$4–US$9. **Credit** AE, MC, V.*

Ossorio ★

316 Brevard Avenue, Cocoa Village, 321 639 2423.

Situated in the heart of tree-lined historic downtown Cocoa Village, this French-style licensed bakery/café is famous for its mouth-watering, hand-baked pastries and freshly roasted coffee. A selection of flatbread pizzas and sandwiches also feature on the menu, both of which are roasted in a wood-fired oven – the smell is as delicious as the food itself! If you don't want a meal then pick up a portion of melt-in-the-mouth homemade ice cream instead.

***Open** 8am–8:30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun. **Main Courses** US$4–US$9. **Credit** AE, MC, V.*

Satchel's Pizza ★ FIND

1800 NE 23rd Avenue, Gainesville, 352 335 7272, www.satchelspizza.com.

Located 2 miles east of downtown Gainesville, Satchel's is super-fun for families and serves the best pizza in town. The offbeat decor is a mad mix of memorabilia and crafts made from stuff most of us would throw away and the eclectic range of seating includes a table inside an old Ford van. The menu is all about pizza and the long list of possible toppings range from roasted red peppers to spicy sausage. Satchel's is very popular with local families, and because you can't make reservations, expect to wait for a table at busy times. However, the onsite children's playground and junk museum will keep any age occupied while you wait.

Open *11am–10pm Tues–Sat* ***Main Courses*** *US$6–US$26.* ***Credit*** *Cash only.*

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

VERY EXPENSIVE/EXPENSIVE

Amelia Island Plantation

★ GREEN

6800 First Coast Highway (SR-A1A), Fernandina Amelia Island, 6 miles south of Fernandina Beach, 904 261 6161, ***www.aipfl.com****.*

Set amongst 1,350 acres of verdant beachfront complete with its own natural lagoon, this massive complex is an idyllic retreat for an active family. The resort's rooms are large and airy, and facilities include championship golf, tennis and cycling. Children love the large landscaped swimming pools and a wild, wonderful and quiet beach is right on the doorstep. Kids Camp Amelia offers 3 to 10–year-olds nature clinics, games and arts, or golf and tennis lessons. And older children are equally well catered for with a recreation programme designed for 11 to 19-year-olds. Amelia Island Plantation is a good base from which to explore Fernandina Beach, Jacksonville and even St. Augustine.

Rooms *249.* ***Rates*** *Rooms US$199–US$409, villas US$229–US$949.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

Courtyard Jacksonville Beach Oceanfront GREEN

1617 North 1st Street, Jacksonville Beach, 904 249 9071, ***www.marriott.com****.*

Jacksonville and its Beaches

Most visitors to Jacksonville stay around the beach area, which is awash with accommodation options, particularly chain motels, including the **Beach Front Best Western** (305 North 1st Street, *904 249 4949,* ***www.bestwesternjacksonvillebeach.com***, rooms US$130–US$170), which is right on the beach. If you prefer to stay on the outskirts of this at times busy area, a budget option on Neptune Beach to the north is the very pink **Seahorse Oceanfront Inn** (120 Atlantic Boulevard, *904 246 2175,* ***www.seahorseoceanfrontinn.com***, rooms from US$100). And for families wanting to stay in Jacksonville's downtown, a convenient option is the **Hyatt Regency** (225 East Coast Line Drive, *904 588 1234,* ***www.jacksonville.hyatt.com***, rooms US$109–US$300), which is adjacent to Jacksonville Landing and has Hertz car hire and two restaurants on site.

Amelia Island Plantation

Perched on the north side of Jacksonville's pristine beach, this comfortable sea-facing hotel is one of the best choices for families in this area. The rooms and suites are clean and spacious – bag one with a private balcony overlooking the beach if you can. An attractive outdoor pool is located on the edge of the beach and makes for a perfect spot from which to play on the sand during the day, or relax with a drink at night. Although there's no onsite restaurant, the hotel is only a couple of blocks away from the **North Beach Village Plaza** (see box, p. 171), which contains a number of dining options, most of which will deliver to the hotel. Proud to be green, the Courtyard has also been recognised as adopting an eco-friendly policy towards the sea turtles which annually nest on these sands.

Daytona Beach

Daytona Beach is crammed with accommodation options, from big brash ocean-facing resorts strung out along the beach to small, charming B&Bs tucked away in quiet residential corners. Beachfront chain options include the **Best Western Aku Tiki** (2225 S Atlantic Avenue, *386 252 9631, www.bwakutiki.com*, rooms from US$120). With a huge, unmissable Tiki god carving right outside, this kitsch resort operates a family-friendly recreation programme for children and adults, and the equally distinctive **Best Western Mayan Inn** (103 S Ocean Avenue, *386 252 2378, www.bestwestern.com*, rooms from US$100) with its huge Mayan painting on the outside wall. For details of the best times for families to visit Daytona Beach, see p. 149.

Fernandina Beach

Fernandina has numerous good accommodation options suitable for visiting families on varying budgets, and wherever you choose to stay you're never far from the beach. The ocean-facing **Amelia Hotel at the Beach** (1997 South Fletcher Avenue, *904 206 5200, http://ameliahotel.com*, rooms US$110–US$130) is a good beachfront option, or if you want to stay downtown, the **Hampton Inn and Suites** (19 S 2nd Street, *904 491 4911, www.hamptoninn.com*, rooms US$120) is in keeping with Fernandina's historic ambience, despite being built in the last decade, and features wooden floors from a local church and Sherbet decor.

Many of Fernandina's Victorian and Queen Anne-style houses and various quirky properties such as Katie's Light, an old wooden lighthouse on the beach, have been converted into holiday homes. For more information on self-catering in Fernandina Beach, see **Amelia Island Vacations** (*904 277 4851, www.ameliaislandvacation.com*) and **Unique Amelia Island Vacations** (*800 940 3955, www.uniqueameliaisland.com*).

Rooms *150.* ***Rates*** *US$145– US$240* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Magnolia Plantation ★ FIND

309 South East 7th Street, Gainesville, 352 375 6653, www.magnoliabnb.com.

Set back from a quiet, leafy road in the heart of Gainesville's charming historic district, the Magnolia Plantation bed and breakfast is the finest place to stay in town. Choose from one of five individually decorated rooms inside the main house – a lovely restored French Second Empire style mansion – or one of six one- to three-bedroomed cottages located in the surrounding 2 acres of tropical gardens. Period furnishings feature throughout and all cottages contain fully equipped kitchens stocked with basic food stuffs. Rates include full breakfast – cottage guests are given the option of having it delivered to their door – and an evening social hour during which complimentary wine and snacks are served in the main house. Downtown Gainesville is only a short walk away.

Rooms *5.* ***Cottages*** *6.* ***Rates*** *Rooms US$135–US$175, cottages US$190–US$280.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** ***In cottages***

Ocean Walk Resort

300 N Atlantic Avenue, Daytona Beach, 800 347 9851, www.oceanwalk.com.

Situated close to the Ocean Walk shopping and dining complex and Daytona's pier, this luxurious beachfront resort is

Cocoa Beach

Cocoa Beach's largest concentration of accommodation options is spread out along SR-A1A as it becomes Atlantic Avenue and on Ocean Beach Boulevard as it runs parallel to the beach behind SR-A1A. Recommended options are the **Holiday Inn Express** (5575 N Atlantic Avenue, *321 868 2525, www.hiexpress.com*, rooms from US$110), **La Quinta** (1275 N Atlantic Avenue, *321 783 2252, www.lq.com*, rooms from US$100) and the **Comfort Inn and Suites** (3901 N Atlantic Avenue, *321 783 2221, www.comfortinn.com*, rooms from US$70).

perfect for families who want to be at the heart of a lively beach. The attraction of this section of Daytona's beach if you have small children is that it's car free, but you might never tear your children away from the enormous hotel pool with its giant waterslide, long lazy river and children's water play area. The accommodation consists of luxury suites set up for self-catering and there are plenty of onsite activities laid on for families who like to play together.

Rooms *150.* ***Rates*** *US$99–US$259.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** A/C

BUDGET

Pirate Haus Inn ★ FIND

32 Treasury Street, St. Augustine, 904 808 1999, www.piratehaus.com.

Children love this pirate-themed family-friendly hostel, tucked away in the heart of St. Augustine's historic district. In addition to dormitory-style accommodation there are five private rooms (three en suite) each containing a double bed and bunk beds or a futon and all are covered with images of pirates. Rates include an all you can eat 'pirate pancake' breakfast and guests have full use of the hostel's kitchen and roof-top barbecue – you're even invited to plunder the herb garden for ingredients. A TV and DVD player feature in the common room, where there's also plenty of board games and books to keep all ages entertained.

Rooms *7.* ***Rates*** *From US$50–US$85.* ***Credit****. MC. V.* ***Amenities*** FREE

INSIDER TIP

Fernandina Beach hosts a Shrimp Festival (*www.shrimpfestival.com*) over the first weekend in May. If you are planning to stay at this time, accommodation should be booked well in advance.

7 Miami & the Southeast Coast

MIAMI & THE SOUTHEAST COAST

With glamorous Miami and its world-famous Art Deco district as its central focus, Florida's southeast coast is a region where celebrities and millionaires come to play and swathes of its glorious coastline are the exclusive territory of winter homes for the rich and famous. Families seeking a taste of big city life Florida style will love Miami's glitz, hustle and sheer style, but swanky nightclubs, designer boutiques and plush mansions are just the brash side of the southeast. Peel back the pages of celebrity magazines and property brochures and you'll find stunning undeveloped surfer beaches where sea turtles come to nest and families come to play. These Atlantic-washed shores have a definite athletic feel as their sands are dotted with beach volleyball courts and their waters laden with surfers. Away from the beaches, expect to find some of the best museums, art galleries and family-friendly attractions in the whole state, many the result of the region's diverse cultural and historical influences and all accessible to visitors young and old. In contrast, large parts of the southeast butt up against the undeveloped tropical wilderness of Big Cypress Swamp and the Everglades, where big city life soon dissolves into a timeless natural environment that's an easy day trip from the urban-soaked coast.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

Miami's main visitor information centre is the **Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau** (701 Brickell Avenue, *800 933 8448*, ***www.miamiandbeaches.com***, open 8:30am–6pm Mon–Fri). However, the **Miami Beach Visitor Center** is more convenient at 1920 Meridian Avenue at the corner with Dade Boulevard (*305 673 7400*, ***www.miamibeachchamber.com***, open 10am–4pm Mon–Sun). Also try the Downtown Miami Welcome Center (***www.downtownmiami.com***) in the lobby of the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts at 174 East Flagler Street. If you're arriving by plane (see p. 180), the visitor information centre at Miami airport is open 24 hours.

INSIDER TIP

Booking accommodation in Miami online via ***www.reservation-services.com*** can be cheaper than booking direct.

For information on Fort Lauderdale, visit the **Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitor Bureau** (100 E Broward Boulevard, *954 765 4466*, ***www.sunny.org***, open 8:30am–5pm Mon–Fri).

Orientation

Situated at the southern tip of the southeast coast, Miami dominates the region. Heading north from Miami, I-95 is the fastest route up the east coast to the area's other major towns and

cities. East of I-95, Hwy-1 leads directly through the region's coastal towns. For those not in a rush, the coast-hugging SR-A1A is the most scenic way to travel through the southeast.

Arriving

By Plane Miami International Airport (*305 876 7000, www.miami-airport.com*) is situated 6 miles west of downtown and receives regular non-stop flights from London Heathrow operated by British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, Continental Airlines and American Airlines, and internal flights operated by various American airlines (see p. 35) from Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, Fort Myers, Key West, Pensacola and Tallahassee.

If you're driving from the airport, SR-112 is the Airport Expressway (toll) and leads through central Miami across the Julia Tuttle Causeway (I-195) to the beach.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (*866 4359 355, www.broward.org/airport*) is a 15-minute drive south from Fort Lauderdale and receives internal flights from Jacksonville, Key West, Tallahassee, Tampa, Orlando and Pensacola operated by various American airlines (see p. 35) but no non-stop flights from the UK.

For information on package tours, see p. 29.

By Car The most direct route from Orlando to the southeast coast is Florida's Turnpike, which cuts across central Florida to run parallel with I-95, the most direct route from the north, at Fort Pierce onwards. Florida's Turnpike is a toll road, so have change handy.

If you're driving from southwest Florida, the picturesque Hwy-41 (Tamiami Trail) cuts across the top of the Everglades from Naples and leads directly into the heart of downtown Miami. However, due to its relatively low speed limit, this road can be slow.

For a faster route take I-75, otherwise known as Alligator Alley (toll), which runs north of Hwy-41 from Naples.

At the point where I-75 turns south to lead into north Miami, the I-595 branches east to become the main route to Fort Lauderdale.

From the Florida Keys, Hwy-1 is an excruciatingly slow

South Beach, Miami

Getting Around Miami

By Car Miami is straightforward to drive around, as major roads lead to all the tourist sights and the grid system is easy to follow. Avoid driving during weekday rush hours – 7am–9am and 4pm–6pm – when you won't go anywhere fast. Parking is plentiful except on South Beach, where your best bet is the large car park opposite the Miami Beach Convention Center on Convention Center Drive, or try the municipal car park on Collins Avenue at 13th Street. Expect to pay around US$1 to US$2 per hour or a flat fee of US$15 to US$20 per day.

By Bus Miami's Metrobus is a slow way to travel around, but its comprehensive service is easy to work out, covers most of Miami's attractions and is well used by the locals – fares US$2 per journey, transfers free (exact change required). To travel by bus around South Beach, the South Beach Local mini bus service runs every 10 to 15 minutes from 7:45am Monday to Saturday and from 10am Sunday until 1am daily, making numerous stops at South Beach's popular locations on the way. The fare is 25¢ per journey. All buses are wheelchair and bike accessible.

By Bike Bikes (and rollerblades) can be hired from Bike and Roll, 210 10th Street (at the junction with Collins Avenue), *305 604 0001*, ***www.bikeandroll.com***, from US$8 per hour or US$25 per day.

By Metromover A free monorail serves the downtown and business district. Its elevated tracks provide great views of the city.

By Metrorail A train service runs from south Miami into the city along a route close to Hwy-1. It travels through downtown and out to Medley, a region north of the airport. This is a commuter service and has few relevant stops for tourists.

The Metrobus, Metromover and Metrorail are all operated by Miami-Dade Transit and for more information *305 770 3131* or visit ***www.miamidade.gov/transit*** for routes and schedules. Timetables can be picked up from visitor information centres (see p. 179).

By Taxi Most people don't hail cabs in Miami. To book a cab call Metro Taxi, *305 888 8888*, Yellow Cab *305 444 4444* or for Miami Beach, Central *305 532 5555*.

route directly into Miami. Faster options are to join the Florida Turnpike, which begins at Florida City, or take the Palmetto Expressway (SR-826), which heads north from Hwy-1 on the western edge of Miami.

Getting Around

With limited public transport options, the only feasible way to travel around most of the southeast coast with children is by car. For details of car hire, see p. 31. For information on getting around Miami, see box above.

WHAT TO DO & SEE

Child-Friendly Festivals & Events

Art Deco Weekend ★
The Miami Design Preservation League hosts a weekend of celebrations in South Beach's Art Deco region each January. The festival has a different theme each year and includes a parade, street entertainers, festival food and arts and crafts stalls. For exact dates and full details check *www.mdpl.org* or *305 672 2014*.

INSIDER TIP

If you plan to visit a lot of Miami's sights, a Go Miami Card (*www.gomiamicard.com*) could save you money. The card gives entry into over 40 attractions and is bought in days of usage from a single day to a week. The fees range from 1-day US$65, US$50 children aged 3 to 12 to 7 days US$239, US$185 children aged 3 to 12. Cards can be purchased online or at the Miami Beach Visitor Center (see p. 179). But do the maths before you buy to check that this deal will work for you.

Children's Top 10 Attractions

1. **Discovering** South Beach's amazing Art Deco; p. 188.
2. **Taking** a dip in Coral Gables' magical Venetian Pool; p. 190.
3. **Learning** about the care of injured sea turtles at the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center; p. 199.
4. **Telling** the time on Fort Lauderdale's Museum of Discovery & Science's giant gravity clock; p. 200.
5. **Breakfast** at Jerry's Famous Deli; p. 203.
6. **Strolling** around West Palm Beach's City Walk; p. 195.
7. **Driving** through Lion Country Safari; p. 200.
8. **Shopping** along South Beach's Lincoln Road; p. 194.
9. **Taking in** panoramic views from the top of the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse; p. 199.
10. **Getting** up close to the animals at Miami's MetroZoo; p. 187.

MIAMI

Overlooking the Caribbean and with a distinctly Hispanic edge – Spanish is the predominant language in many areas – Miami, with its fashion-conscious beaches, sophistication and reputed high murder rate, might not be every parent's first choice as a holiday destination, but don't let 1980s' cop shows or crime statistics put you off bringing children to this stylish city. For all its glamour and celebrities, Miami is surprisingly family friendly and its many world-class museums, sumptuous art galleries and cool zoos are some of the best in Florida – there's plenty to keep all ages occupied for days.

South Beach is the jewel in the crown of Miami's consistently glorious beaches and no

MIAMI

Attractions

- Art Deco Welcome Center **9**
- Bal Harbour Shops **4**
- Bayside Marketplace **14**
- Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park **27**
- Crandon Park Beach **24**
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- Haulover Beach Park **3**
- Jungle Island **13**
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- Miami Children's Museum **12**
- Miami MetroZoo **28**
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- Miami Seaquarium **23**
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Dining

- Big Pink **8**
- Californian Pizza Kitchen **20**
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Accommodation

- Hotel Astor **11**
- Loews Miami Beach **5**
- Ritz Carlton Key Biscayne **26**

Art Deco district

visit is complete without a trip to the famous Art Deco district, whose stylish architecture is home to countless swish restaurants and upmarket shops.

Don't be deterred by Miami's size – this is a city of neighbourhoods and once you concentrate on the areas you want to visit, the whole place becomes manageable.

Miami's Family-Friendly Beaches

Key Biscayne

Separated from the mainland by the Rickenbacker Causeway (US$1 toll), Key Biscayne is a family-orientated area of Miami where leafy roads are pounded by joggers and cyclists and a relaxed atmosphere prevails. Two ideal beaches for children can be found on this island. The first, **Crandon Park Beach,** which sits on the east side of Crandon Boulevard (the main road leading through Key Biscayne) is open from sunrise until sunset (US$6 per car). Popular with local families, especially at weekends, this beach's 3 miles of golden sand is protected by a sand bar, making its waters safe for children to swim in.

INSIDER TIP

A large, landscaped park with a carousel and playground sits on the west side of Crandon Boulevard and is a shady, pleasant place to stop with pre-school children.

The **Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center** ★ AGE 5 & UP (*305 361 6767, www.biscaynenaturecenter.org*) is situated at the north end of Crandon Beach and features

exhibits explaining the region's marine environments as well as organising child-friendly, naturalist-led tours into nearby sea grass beds where you can scoop up nets full of small sealife for the guide to explain what you've found.

Hugging Key Biscayne's southern tip, **Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park** (8am until sunset, US$6 per car) is a good choice for families who want more than just sea and sand. At weekends the Latin population is out in force and upbeat music livens up the whole beach. Standing at the end of the beach, the Cape Florida lighthouse is accessible via free ranger-led tours at 10am and 1pm Thursday to Monday. View the keeper's former living quarters and take in expansive views across the key. Bikes can be rented for US$5 per hour, or quadrocycles, which accommodate four people, for US$15 per hour, from a cycle outlet in the park's main car park.

Close to the beach is the **Lighthouse Cafe** (*305 361 8487),* which is open for breakfast from 9am and serves soups, salads, seafood and pasta dishes for around US$10 until sundown. Or try **The Boater's Grill** (*305 361 0080)* at No Name Harbor, a small, mainly seafood, restaurant where the veranda overlooks a busy marina (mains approximately US$17).

INSIDER TIP

Haulover Beach Park to the north of Bal Harbour shops (see p. 193) is one of the few places along Miami's ocean front with plenty of parking (US$5 per day), space and leisure facilities. Although popular with some local families, the northern section of this beach is notoriously an unofficial 'clothing optional' area.

Oleta River State Park ★★

3400 NE 163rd Street, North Miami, 305 919 1846.

Half-an-hour's drive from downtown but convenient if you're

Miami Vice or Nice?

Once famous for car jacking, Miami has worked hard over the past 2 decades to clean up its act. Don't worry about visiting with children as long as you exercise all the usual cautions of being in a big city. Be careful from whom and where you ask directions, use ATMs in busy areas, leave valuables in your hotel and steer clear of quiet, unlit streets at night. And don't venture out of the tourist areas. If you're driving, stay on the main roads, keep your car doors locked and windows closed and never stop in unlit areas, even if someone flags you down. If you are bumped, drive to a busy street before getting out. Don't walk around downtown at night, be careful walking along Biscayne Boulevard and 2nd Avenue during the day and never be tempted to stay in any of the motels on Biscayne Boulevard.

staying at the north end of Miami Beach, Oleta River is the largest urban park in Florida and the place to head for privacy and seclusion. The park features a small beach, mangrove-lined river and miles of biking trails. Visitors can rent kayaks, canoes and bikes, while a calm lagoon away from the beach area provides safe swimming for children. Keep a look out for cameras, as this park is a popular film and TV location.

Open *8am–sunset daily.* ***Adm*** *US$6 per car.*

South Beach ★★★

Running from South Pointe Park to 23rd Street, Miami's South Beach is one of the world's coolest beaches and is an entirely separate region from the rest of Miami Beach, which stretches up to Sunny Isles in the north. Despite its prestige, this is an active beach and always busy with joggers, cyclists, rollerbladers and power walkers. The sands are wide and wonderful, and dotted with volleyball courts, jaunty lifeguard huts and large blue and white boxes where attendants rent beach chairs. Unlike other sections of Miami Beach, this stretch isn't dominated by high-rise resorts and the landscaped Lummas Park where you'll encounter a spectrum of South Beach life from the young and rich walking designer dogs, to the homeless sleeping on benches, separates the sand from the world-famous Ocean Drive.

Away from the sand, South Beach is a place to be seen in for many, but for visiting families it's simply a place to see. Cafés and restaurants spill out onto the pavements along Ocean Drive and Lincoln Avenue, and the eclectic mix of boutiques and trendy chain stores will keep teenagers occupied for hours (see p. 194). South Beach's compact streets are easy to cover on foot and if you get tired of spotting Art Deco and shopping, the excellent art galleries (see p. 190) are a good diversion for older children.

INSIDER TIP

Memorial Day weekend (the last weekend in May) is notorious on South Beach. Thousands of revellers descend to party the weekend away and a heavy police presence in recent years has resulted in scores of arrests. South Beach is no place to visit with children at this time.

At the north end of South Beach, near the Convention Center on Meridian Avenue, is the moving **Holocaust Memorial** (open 9am–9pm daily). Miami Beach is home to many Holocaust survivors and this emotive statue – a giant outstretched arm stamped with an inmate number from Auschwitz and surrounded by nearly 100 life-sized grief-stricken bodies – is an unforgettable testimony to those who did not survive. Close to the Memorial on Convention Center Drive is the **Miami Beach Botanical Gardens** (***www.mbgarden.org***,

open 9am–5pm Tues–Sun, free) a tropical haven of peace, shaded benches, picnic tables, restrooms and fun public art.

Miami's Top Animal Attractions

Jungle Island ★ AGE 15 & UNDER

1111 Parrot Jungle Trail, 305 400 7000, www.parrotjungle.com.

One of Miami's more expensive family attractions, Jungle Island takes half a day to explore and is recommended for children who love birds and primates. The hundreds of macaws, cockatoos, parrots and other exotic birds are as loud as they are colourful – get up close to them in Manu Encounter, a large walk-through aviary, or in the nursery where newly fledged birds are raised. Other animals include a host of entertaining primates – look out for twin orangutans Peanut Butter and Pumpkin Pie – and ligers, hybrids of lions and tigers with distinctive striped and spotted fur. 'Winged Wonders' features birds performing amazing tricks and is one of two animal shows to watch. In the Everglades Habitat, visitors travel via wooden boardwalks through a recreation of south Florida's famous landscape to encounter a striking albino alligator. Bring swimming costumes so you can splurge down a massive waterslide on the beach, and if the squawking birds get too much, the calm flamingo lake will soothe all fraught nerves.

Parrots at Jungle Island

Time** 2–3 hr. **Open** 10am–5pm daily. **Adm** US$30, US$24 children aged 3–10, under 3s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

Miami MetroZoo ★★ ALL AGES

12400 SW 152nd Street, 305 251 0400, www.miamimetrozoo.com.

Situated south of Miami, towards Homestead and about 45 minutes from downtown, this huge zoo is one of the most impressive in Florida. Hundreds of animals roam through spacious habitats representing locations such as an African plain and Asian jungle. Animal highlights include majestic Bengal tigers and too-cute- to-be-true koalas and the daily wildlife show aims to educate through entertainment. Children wanting to learn more can ask questions at the Keeper's Talks, and while the petting zoo provides the opportunity for all ages to get

Miami's Art Deco Historic District ★★★

South Beach is home to the world's largest collection of Art Deco buildings and the stunning assortment of pastel-hued, streamlined architecture that lines its streets is one of Florida's greatest attractions. The Art Deco district is a must see for every visitor and worth bringing your children to, as the memory of these unique buildings will stay with them forever.

Construction of this district began after WW1, with the earliest Art Deco dating back to the mid-1920s. This sleek style grew to become the height of modern fashion in the 20s and 30s. However, following WW2, Miami's fashionable residents moved further north and South Beach and its beautiful buildings went into a deep decline, with some even calling for its total demolition. The campaign to preserve this district began in the late 1970s with the establishment of the Miami Design Preservation League. Their battles with developers and careful restoration work are responsible for saving this historic area and making it Miami's most fashionable neighbourhood once more.

Today the Art Deco Historic District is bordered by the Atlantic to the east, Alton Road to the west, 6th Street to the south and 23rd Street to the north, and contains around 800 listed Art Deco buildings – even Burger King is Art Deco. The biggest concentration can be found along sea-facing Ocean Drive, Collins Avenue, Washington Avenue and Lincoln Road. Take a stroll along Ocean Drive as dusk settles and the neon lights start to flicker on, and watch these glorious old buildings come to life.

The **Art Deco Welcome Center** (1001 Ocean Drive, *305 531, 3484, www.mdpl.org*) is open 9:30am to 7pm daily and contains a host of Art Deco gifts, including posters, books, postcards and vintage memorabilia. Pick up an iPod self-guided walking tour of the area (self-guided audio tours are available to hire from 9:30am–5pm), or join one of the daily guided tours at 10:30am, except Thursday when the tours depart at 6:30pm (US$20 adults, US$15 children). For details of a cycling tour around the Art Deco Historic District, see p. 188.

up close to some species, older children love taking a camel ride (US$5). The MetroZoo takes some walking around, but you can catch a tram tour which provides a fascinating commentary on the animals along the way. No food or drink can be brought into the zoo, but there are picnic tables near the front entrance.

Time *3–4 hr.* ***Open*** *9:30am–5:30pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$16 adults, US$12 children.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Arrive early at Miami MetroZoo; it gets very hot in the midday sun and most of the animals take a snooze.

Miami Seaquarium ALL AGES

4400 Rickenbacker Causeway, 305 361 5705, www.miamiseaquarium.com.

Worth a visit if you haven't been to SeaWorld (see p. 74), the Miami Seaquarium is a much smaller and older version. The park features sharks, manatees and turtles as well as numerous species of seabird. The main attractions are Seaquarium's animal shows, of which Lolita the killer whale is the star, Salty the sea lion the cheesiest and Flipper the dolphin the most famous – the original **Flipper** TV show was filmed here. The Dolphin Harbor area runs a programme of dolphin interaction sessions, all of which need to be booked in advance and come with an extra fee attached.

Time *3–4 hr.* ***Open*** *9:30am–6pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$38, US$28 children aged 3–9, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Miami's Top Historic Attractions

Spanish Monastery AGE 3 & UP

16711 W Dixie Hwy, North Miami Beach, 305 945 1461, www.spanishmonastery.com.

Controversial newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst bought this medieval Spanish monastery in Segovia in 1925 and had it dismantled and shipped to North America. Despite his intention to rebuild the monastery in his Californian home, financial troubles forced Hearst to sell it before it was unpacked and the new owners brought the pieces to Miami to be reconstructed. Today this charming monastery is a working Episcopal church. Older children might not be interested in a visit, but the tranquil grounds and peaceful cloisters are pleasant to amble around with little ones.

Seaquarium dolphins

Miami's Art Scene

With many cultural and historical influences pouring into its creative melting pot, Miami's art scene contains galleries large and small to inspire the artistic imagination of any child. In addition to the **Miami Art Museum** (see p. 193), these are some of the galleries on offer.

Situated inside the University of Miami's Coral Gables Campus, the **Lowe Art Museum** AGE 10 & UP (*305 284 3535, www.lowemuseum.org*, open 10–4pm Tues–Sat, noon–4pm Sun, US$10, under 12s free) exhibits old masters and contemporary artists.

In the heart of the Art Deco district, the **Bass Museum of Art** ★ AGE 7 & UP at 2121 Park Avenue (*305 673 7530, www.bassmuseum.org*, open noon–5pm Wed–Sun, US$8 adults, under 6s free) displays an overview of major European work and contemporary art from around the world.

Also on South Beach, the **Wolfsonian-FIU** ★★ AGE 7 & UP (*305 531 1001, www.wolfsonian.org*, open noon–6pm Mon, Tues, Sat & Sun, noon–9pm Thurs & Fri, US$8, US$5 children aged 6–12) embodies all the elegance of Art Deco and exhibits mainly North American and European art from 1885 to 1945. Collections include work from Art Nouveau artist and architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Arts and Crafts practitioner William Morris, plus collections of historical political propaganda and American industrial design – it's worth just peeking inside the lobby alone to see its stunning gold and emerald fountain.

Within walking distance of the Wolfsonian, **ArtCenter/South Florida** AGE 10 & UP on Lincoln Road (*305 674 8278, www.artcentersf.org*, open 11am–10pm daily, free) is a collection of eclectic artists' studios and exhibition space whose fun, sometimes challenging, work appeals to teenagers.

***Time** 30 min. **Open** 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun. **Adm** US$5, US$2 under 12s.*

Venetian Pool ★★★ ALL AGES

2701 DeSoto Boulevard, Coral Gables, 305 460 5356, www.venetianpool.com.

Tucked away in a shady corner of Coral Gables in south Miami, the Venetian Pool was an unsightly limestone quarry until it was transformed in the 1920s into one of the most enchanting places in the world to swim. The pool is fed by sparkling spring water and surrounded by pink stucco towers, palm trees, waterfalls and caves, while Venetian bridges lead over its stunning blue waters. Despite its beauty and upmarket location, the Venetian Pool is a municipal swimming pool and popular with locals. The warm waters and magical surroundings make for a pleasant break from salty seawater and chlorine-soaked hotel pools.

Time *1–2 hr.* ***Open*** *11am–5:30pm Tues–Fri, 10am–4:30pm Sat & Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$11, US$6 children aged 3–12, no under 3s (proof of age may be required).* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

When visiting the Venetian Pool, take a quick peek at the nearby world-famous Biltmore Hotel (***www.biltmorehotel.com***) on Anastasia Avenue.

Vizcaya Museum & Gardens

★★★ **AGE 12 & UP**

3521 S Miami Avenue, 305 250 9133, ***www.vizcayamuseum.org****.*

This sumptuous neo-Renaissance villa was built on the banks of Biscayne Bay in the early 20th century as a winter residence for Chicago industrialist James Deering. It's a must for families who enjoy exploring stately homes. Miami's most breathtaking attraction is entered via a fountain-strewn walkway into a museum crammed with fabulous furnishings from all over Europe. Each room is decorated in a different style and in amongst all the gorgeous antiques you'll discover an old telephone switchboard and an outdoor swimming pool reached from a grotto beneath the house.

The highlight for children of the large, formal French and Italian gardens is an orange jasmine maze, and the Venetian water landing commands expansive waterfront views towards Key Biscayne.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *9:30am–4:30pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$15, US$6 children aged 6–12, under 6s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Miami's Child-Friendly Museums

Miami Children's Museum

★★ **AGE 8 & UNDER**

980 MacArthur Causeway, 305 373 5437, ***www.miamichildrensmuseum.org****.*

The two floors of this imaginative museum are filled with interactive exhibits designed

Venetian Pool

for pre-school-age children. Through the arts, culture and lifestyle-orientated exhibits, children are encouraged to learn through play skills, including how to look after pets, how banks work and what goes on inside the human body. They can also explore Miami's neighbourhoods, record music in a sound studio and peek behind the scenes of a TV studio.

After all that learning, they can bounce around slides and tunnels in the Castle of Dreams.

Time *2 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–6pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$15, under 1s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Miami Science Museum

★ AGE 3 & UP

3280 South Miami Avenue, 305 646 4200, www.miamisci.org.

Aiming to make science easy to understand, this museum is entertaining and informative and contains around 140 hands-on exhibits revealing secrets of the universe to young minds. At the adjoining Wildlife Center, visitors view reptiles and rehabilitating birds and the arachnophobics in your family can face their fears by petting a tame tarantula. A visit includes an astronomy show ★★ at the adjacent **Space Transit Planetarium** as well as numerous demonstrations requiring audience participation. At the time of writing, a brand new state-of-the-art, energy-efficient home is being built for the museum in Miami's planned Museum Park. See p. 193 for more information.

Time *2–3 hr.* ***Open*** *10am–6pm daily.* ***Adm*** *US$15, US$11 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Miami's Child-Friendly Tours

Duck Tours ★ AGE 3 & UP

1661 James Avenue, South Beach, 305 673 2217, www.ducktours miami.com.

Take your children with you on the 'quackiest' way to see Miami. Otherwise you'll be too embarrassed travelling around style-conscious Miami in a giant duck-shaped vehicle. That said, these 90-minute tours on land and water are an entertaining way to discover Miami and find out where the city's rich and famous residents live. Tours leave from Lincoln Road and departure times vary, so book in advance either online or in person. Tickets US$35 adults, US$20 children, under 3s free.

South Beach Bike Tours AGE 10 & UP

305 673 2002, www.southbeach biketours.com.

Half-day cycling tours around the famous and infamous nooks and crannies of the Art Deco Historic District are both informative and fun. Experienced guides lead cyclists through the history of the area and take in film locations, celebrity homes and cool hotels. Tours depart daily at 10am from the junction with 5th Street and Washington Avenue and reservations must be made in advance by phone.

Tickets *US$59 per person including refreshments.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

INSIDER TIP

The tranquil Deering Estate at Cutler (***www.deeringestate.org***) on the edge of Biscayne Bay to the south of Miami organises half-day naturalist-led canoe tours through the mangroves that hug the bay's coastline. Children over 9 can join a tour and tickets cost US$25, US$15 for children aged 9–14. For more information and to make reservations call *305 235 1668*.

Miami's Shopping Hot Spots

In a city that personifies style, it comes as no surprise that Miami's streets contain sophisticated shopping to indulge all budgets and age groups.

Bal Harbour Shops

Collins Avenue, just north of the SR-22, ***www.balharbourshops.com.***

Anyone seeking designer brands at bargain prices gravitates to Bal Harbour Shops on Miami's North Beach, with its exclusive but generic stores and valet parking.

Bayside Marketplace, Downtown

www.baysidemarketplace.com. Orientated towards tourists, this downtown waterfront marketplace on Biscayne Boulevard is

The Metro Dade Cultural Center

Situated in the heart of Miami's downtown, the Mediterranean-style Metro Dade Cultural Center contains two first-class and inexpensive draws. **The Historical Museum of Southern Florida ★** **AGE 5 & UP** (*305 375 1492,* ***www.hmsf.org***, open 10am–5pm Tues–Fri, noon–5pm Sat & Sun, US$8, US$5 children aged 6–12, under 6s free, time 1–2 hours) promotes an understanding of the history of south Florida and the Caribbean through stories. The recreations of old Miami are good for children to engage with, and the old photographs of the city are worth the entrance fee alone for adults.

On the other side of the courtyard, the **Miami Art Museum ★★** **AGE 12 & UP** (*305 375 3000,* ***www.miamiartmuseum.org***, open 10am–5pm Tues–Fri, noon–5pm Sat & Sun, US$8, under 12s free) exhibits art from the 20th century to the present day.

At the time of writing, a new cultural centre is being planned for downtown Miami. Due to open in 2013, the Museum Park will stand at the waterfront overlooking Biscayne Bay and contain the two museums currently in the Metro Dade Cultural Center, along with the Miami Science Museum (see p. 191) as well as landscaped gardens and sculpture installations.

suited to shopping with young children and contains a fairground carousel, comic stores, funky T-shirt shops and souvenir stalls plus reasonably priced family dining options.

Flagler Street, Downtown
Flagler Street offers affordable Miami fashion and big chain stores such as Macy's, but has none of the glamour of other shopping areas.

Lincoln Road, South Beach
★★★ *www.lincolnroad.org.*
Designed in 1957 and saved through millions of dollars worth of restoration, the pedestrianised section of Lincoln Road, with its palm trees, Art Deco fountains and string of pavement cafés and restaurants, is shopping heaven for the fashion-conscious teen, who'll be hard pushed to decide between surfwear and cute boutiques.

Miracle Mile, Coral Gables
A family highlight of Coral Gables's Miracle Mile is **Boy Meets Girl** (*305 445 9668*), a designer clothes shop for newborns to pre-teens and one of the distinctly upmarket clothes and gift shops on this famous road – look out for the Jedi master postboxes.

THE SOUTHEAST COAST

Fort Lauderdale

Three hours drive from Orlando and less than an hour from Miami, Fort Lauderdale is an inviting mix of relaxed beach and smart downtown, where cultural and historic attractions, and great shopping, will appeal to all ages. Fort Lauderdale is known as the Venice of America thanks to hundreds of miles of inland waterways, many lined with exclusive houses, others with sleek shops and restaurants.

Getting out onto the water is an essential part of any visit (see 'Child-Friendly Tours', p. 192). An entertaining and inexpensive way to travel on Fort Lauderdale's waterways is by water bus (*954 467 6677, www.watertaxi.com*). The service runs between Oakland Park Boulevard and Southeast 17th Street along the Intracoastal waterway, and west along the new River into downtown as far as Esplanade Park. Its stops are convenient for many of the city's attractions. Day passes cost US$15, US$11 children aged 4 to 11, under 4s free, and a map and timetable are available online or from the visitor information centre (see p. 179).

Once famous for its regular deluge of spring breakers, Fort Lauderdale has cleaned up its image and today you're more likely to find locals reading or jogging on its fine beach. However, the real appeal of these palm-lined sands is that they are not dominated by high-rise resorts and are accessible from an oceanfront promenade that's enjoyable to stroll along. The teen-focused Beach Place, with

its shops, restaurants and bars, forms the focal point, but you don't have to walk far to find a peaceful spot to play if you have small children. Watch out for the turtle nests dotted in the soft sand in season (May to early autumn) and marked with yellow tape.

North of Beach Place, **Bonnet House** AGE 6 & UP (954 563 5393, www.bonnethouse.org, open 10am–4pm Tues, Thurs & Fri, 10am–5pm Wed, 10am–4pm Sat, 11am–4pm Sun, US$20, US$16 children aged 6–12, under 6s free, time 1 hour) was once the home of American artist Frederic Clay Bartlett and today visitors can explore his beautiful old house and studios – children enjoy the gardens and ponds where you'll spot monkeys, swans and even the odd manatee.

The swish Las Olas Boulevard (see p. 202) leads inland from the beach to Fort Lauderdale's downtown – a charismatic blend of gleaming new buildings and charming historic district. The main tourist draws here are the waterfront **Stranahan House** AGE 12 & UP (954 524 4736, www.stranahanhouse.org), an old trading post restored to provide an intimate glimpse into the life of an early settler (tours run daily at 1pm, 2pm and 3pm, US$12 adults, US$7 children, time 30 minutes), and the **Museum of Discovery & Science** (see p. 200).

However, one of the most relaxing and enjoyable things for families to do together is simply to meander along Fort Lauderdale's tropical Riverwalk, a shady, brick walkway where you can take in the sights – old and new – shop and enjoy lunch at one of the numerous restaurants.

West Palm Beach

www.palmbeachfl.com.

Less than an hour's drive from Fort Lauderdale and 2 hours from Orlando, West Palm Beach and surrounds are often dismissed by visitors as merely a hideaway for the rich and famous. There's no denying this area is popular with solitude-seeking celebs, yet between the mansions and expensive postcodes lie a host of family-friendly attractions, great shopping and fine beaches.

West Palm Beach began life as a community created to house workers employed by the railroad developer and tycoon Henry Flagler, who once owned two hotels in town, and today West Palm's upbeat downtown is dominated by City Place, an immaculate shopping and entertainment district (see p. 202). A short walk from City Place, the **Norton Museum of Art** AGE 13 & UP (1451 S Olive Avenue, 561 832 5196, www.norton.org, open 10am–5pm Tues–Sat, 1–5pm Sun, US$12 adults, US$5 visitors aged 13–21, under 13s free, time 1 hour), is this region's primary cultural attraction and its 30 galleries showcase a strong collection of American art from 1880 to 1950 and other significant

work from around the world – young visitors should look out for the colourful Persian sealife ceiling made from over 600 pieces of hand-blown glass.

The **Palm Beach Zoo** AGE 3 & UP (1301 Summit Boulevard, *561 547 9453, www.palmbeachzoo.org*, open 9am–5pm daily, US$15, US$10 children aged 3–12, under 3s free, time 2–3 hours) is home to a range of local indigenous wildlife such as the endangered Florida panther, alongside a host of animals from around the world. However, to experience the best animal attraction this region has to offer, head 20 miles west along Hwy-98 to Lion Country Safari (see p. 200), Florida's only drive-through safari.

Best Beaches & Beach Communities

Deerfield ★★

With its rustic pier reaching out into the Atlantic and busy, friendly waterfront, Deerfield Beach is one of the southeast coast's best-kept secrets and a great place for families to chill out away from the commercialisation of the region's more famous beaches. This is a young, vibrant beach where picnic tables nestle beneath shady palm trees and volleyball courts are strewn along its golden sands. A paved walkway stretching along the edge of the beach contains accommodation options and a range of places to eat – try **Kelly's Ocean Grill** (*954 421 4550*) next to the pier for inexpensive burgers and sandwiches, or **JB's on the Beach** (*954 571 5220, www.jbsonthebeach.com*) for pasta, seafood and paninis. Parking is metered with a 4-hour limit (US$1.50 per hour) and is hard to find when the beach is very busy. Alternative parking is available at North Ocean Drive, one block east of SR-A1A.

INSIDER TIP

Just north of Pompano Beach on SR-A1A, Hillsboro Inlet Park is a perfect place to picnic with small children. This picturesque spot overlooks an old lighthouse and has a children's play area, picnic tables, toilets and a large ship's bell commemorating the keepers of the lighthouse.

Jupiter ★★

The small community of Jupiter, its surrounding beaches and stunning 15-mile long island make up one of the finest spots

Deerfield Beach

Three Beach Parks

Florida's southeast coast is home to several parks containing family-friendly beaches and other outdoor activities. South of Fort Lauderdale, the broad beach at **John U. Lloyd State Park** is a favourite with nesting sea turtles and if you're in the area in June or July, book a place on their turtle awareness programme (*954 923 2833)* – you can visit the beach at night to view females coming ashore to nest. **Red Reef Park** near Boca Raton spreads over both sides of SR-A1A and contains the **Gumbo Limbo Nature Center** (see p. 199) and a boardwalk leading to a quiet beach popular with small children and snorkellers. Also in Boca Raton, **Spanish River Park** on SR-A1A contains a large children's play area, nature trail, viewing tower and lagoon as well as a glorious beach. All of these parks charge a small fee for cars.

along Florida's southeast coastline, offering visiting families a lively beach life and clutch of attractions. Climb the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse (see p. 199) to view the region's dazzling coastline and network of inland waterways, all lined with some of the most exclusive and expensive property in Florida. Beach parking lines the A1A as it leads along the coast from Jupiter to nearby Juno Beach where you'll also find a large car park. This small beach is a surfer's paradise and home to the **Loggerhead Marinelife Center** AGE 5 & UP (14200 Hwy-1, *561 627 8280, www.marinelife.org*, open 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–4pm Sun, free, but a US$5 donation requested, time 30 minutes to 1 hour), a sea turtle hospital, complete with a child-friendly learning area and a network of nature trails. South of Juno Beach, the **MacArthur Beach State Park** (10900 Jack Nicklaus Drive (A1A), *561 624 6952, www.macarthurbeach.org*, open 8am–sunset daily, US$5 per car) is a fabulous state park offering visitors opportunities to kayak, snorkel and mess around on 2 miles of pristine sands. While on Jupiter Island, the **Blowing Rocks Preserve** (574 South Beach Road, *561 744 6668,* open 9am–5pm daily, US$3) features a long limestone outcrop riddled with holes through which shoots of sea water burst at high tide.

The Driftwood Mall off Hwy-1 contains a couple of upmarket places to eat (see p. 205) and cute shops. Alternatively head to Jupiter Square at the intersection with Hwy-1 and Indiantown Road where you'll find a selection of inexpensive dining options, large supermarket and bike hire shop.

Top Family Attractions

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum AGE 5 & UP

Big Cypress Seminole Reservation, 17 miles north of I-75 at exit 49, 863 902 1113, www.ahtahthiki.com.

Located on the large Big Cypress Reservation inland of Fort Lauderdale, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is the place to bring children who want to learn about the traditions and culture of Florida's Seminoles – the only Native American Indian tribe who did not sign a peace treaty with the US government. The museum consists of a living village where Seminoles work with traditional crafts, exhibitions of rare clothing and artefacts, and a mile-long boardwalk leading into Cypress Swamp containing interpretive boards explaining the function of different plants. A visit includes an impressive five-screen film detailing historical and cultural information about the tribe. Billie Swamp Safari tours are connected to the museum and run airboat and swamp buggy tours into **Big Cypress Reservation** (*www.swampsafari.com*).

Time** 2 hr. **Open** 9am–5pm daily. **Adm** US$9, US$6 children aged 4–12, under 4s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

Butterfly World AGE 3 & UP

Tradewinds Park, 3600 W Sample Road, Coconut Creek, 954 977 4400, www.butterflyworld.com.

Butterfly World contains around 5,000 multicoloured butterflies in lush tropical surroundings and a collection of exotic hummingbirds and macaws that eat out of your hand. The recreated rainforest environment, complete with mist-filled cave and waterfall, is an evocative habitat to explore, and the Bug Zoo contains millions of amazing insects – children love it. No food is allowed in the park but there is a picnic area near the entrance.

Time** 2 hr. **Open** 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 11am–5pm Sun, last admission 4pm. **Adm** US$25, US$20 children aged 3–11, under 3s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

Children's Museum of Boca Raton at Singing Pines AGE 8 & UNDER

498 Crawford Boulevard, Boca Raton, 561 368 6875, www.cmboca.org.

Located in one of the oldest houses in Boca Raton (around 1912), 17 miles north of Fort Lauderdale, this tiny museum is for children aged between 3 and 12. All the exhibits are designed to stimulate their imagination and contain activity centres where they can play at shopping, create works of art and make postcards to send to friends. The museum is currently in the process of expanding and its new extension, a replica of the first house built in Boca Raton in 1897, will include further exhibits and a café.

Time** 2 hr. **Open** Noon–4pm Tues–Sat. **Adm** US$3 per person, infants free. **Amenities

Butterfly World, Coconut Creek

Gumbo Limbo Nature Center

★★★ AGE 3 & UP

1801 North Ocean Boulevard, Boca Raton, 561 338 1473, www.gumbolimbo.org.

The Gumbo Limbo tree is known as the 'tourist tree' because of its red, peeling bark, and the nature centre named after it is a fabulous facility where children can learn about the plants and animals found in the area. Located inside Red Reef Park (see p. 197), the nature centre contains large seawater tanks filled with all kinds of marine life, some of which are being nursed back to health – try to coincide your visit with feeding times (2:30pm daily or 11am on Saturdays) as children love to watch the sharks' frenzy. A boardwalk leading through the surrounding hardwood hammock ends at a 40-foot observation tower from which you can gaze down at the surrounding tree canopy or out to the Atlantic, where on a clear day you can spy the Gulf Stream. Many families combine a visit to this centre with time on the surrounding beautiful beach, where sea turtles come to lay their eggs in season.

Time** 1 hr. **Open** 9am–4pm Mon–Sat, noon–4pm Sun. **Adm** A donation of US$5 per person is suggested but not essential. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

Although most of the collections in Boca Raton's Sport Immortals Museum (*561 997 2575, www.sportsimmortals.com*) feature North American sports, it's amazing memorabilia includes a pair of Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves and a football signed by Pelé.

Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse & Museum ★ AGE 5 & UP

500 County Highway 707, Jupiter Beach, 561 515 2165, www.lrhs.org.

Apart from the Civil War years, this resplendent, still working

lighthouse on the banks of the Jupiter Inlet has not missed a night of guiding sea traffic since it was built in 1860. Climb to the top to breathe in sweeping views of the surrounding scenic coastline and inland waterways, and take time to explore the onsite museum that details the history of the region from the Calusa Indians to WW2. The walls of the onsite café are lined with evocative old photographs, but better still take a picnic down to the shady river bank.

Time** 1 hr. **Open** 10am–5pm daily, last tour 4pm. **Adm** US$7 adults, US$5 children aged 6–18, under 6s free. **Amenities

Lion Country Safari

★★ ALL AGES

2003 Lion Country Safari Road, Loxahatchee, 561 793 1084, www.lioncountrysafari.com.

Roll up your car windows and take a deep breath before embarking on Florida's only drive-through safari. On this 4-mile drive through 500 acres of varying habitats you'll encounter first hand a range of free roaming animals including rhinos, bison, giraffes, chimpanzees and, the stars of the show, lions. You'll get a CD to play along the way that provides full information on the animals you'll encounter, and Safari World, a small complex of rides, a petting zoo, water play area and paddle boats, awaits at the end of the drive.

Time** 2–3 hr. **Open** 10am–4pm daily. **Adm** US$26, US$19 children aged 3–9, under 3s free. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

If you're visiting Lion Country Safari in January or February, look out for the South Florida Fair (*www.southfloridafair.com*) that hitches up off Southern Boulevard (Hwy-98) to the east of this attraction. This old-fashioned fair consists of rides, animal shows, live music, arts and crafts and the Miss South Florida contest.

Museum of Discovery & Science ★★ AGE 3 & UP

401 SW 2nd Street, Fort Lauderdale, 954 467 6637, www.mods.org.

An enormous and wacky gravity clock (tell the time by counting balls) marks the entrance and sets the scene for this inventive museum designed for children. The interactive exhibits are equally entertaining for adults and it's easy to wile away a couple of hours exploring the likes of Gizmo City, which explains how science infiltrates all aspects of our lives. Aimed at under 7s, the Discovery Center is an educational play area designed to stimulate young minds and the IMAX cinema screens a changing programme of documentaries throughout the day.

Time** 2–3 hr. **Open** 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–6pm Sun, extended IMAX hours most evenings. **Adm** US$11, US$9 children aged 2–12, under 2s free exhibits only; US$9, US$7 children IMAX only; combination tickets available. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities

The Jungle Queen

Child-Friendly Tours

Jungle Queen AGE 7 & UP

801 Seabreeze Boulevard (SR-A1A), Bahia Mar Beach Resort, 954 462 5596, www.junglequeen.com.

The **Jungle Queen** is a majestic old riverboat whose entertaining sightseeing trips explore Fort Lauderdale's maze of inland waterways, taking in exclusive neighbourhoods and historic districts along the way. Narrated tours depart at 9:30am and 1:30pm most days and travel all the way to the edge of the Everglades. Trips include a stop at a recreated Native American village where visitors are treated to a round of alligator wrestling.

***Time** 3 hr. **Rates** US$17, US$13 under 12s. **Credit** MC, V.*

INSIDER TIP

The 3-hour Jungle Queen Cruise is long for small children. Take a water bus instead (see p. 194); you'll still get a taste of Fort Lauderdale's waterways but youngsters won't get bored.

Sawgrass Recreation Park

★ AGE 5 & UP

1005 N Hwy-27, Fort Lauderdale, 954 389 0202, www.everglades tours.com.

A short drive from Fort Lauderdale brings you to the edge of Big Cypress Swamp, a vast flat expanse of land dotted with small cypress trees and shallow marshes. Sawgrass Recreation Park, on the edge of the swamp, runs daily airboat tours that whizz visitors out into this extraordinary subtropical environment, riddled with native wildlife and birdlife. Tours last 30 minutes, throughout which the captain shares stories of the Seminole tribe and the region's wildlife.

Time** 30 min. First tours leave at 9am, after which they depart every half an hour until 5pm. Reservations are not required. **Adm** US$20, US$10 children aged 4–12, under 4s free. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

For more information on airboat tours, see p. 234.

West Palm Beach Tours

Departing from West Palm Beach's City Place (see p. 202), DIVA Duck tours AGE 5 & UP (877 844 4188, www.divaduck.com, US$25 adults, US$15 children) run similar water- and land-based tours to its Miami counterpart. Tours last around an 75 minutes and take in the area's historical sights as well as the homes of the rich and famous. Alternatively, take a more relaxed Water Taxi tour (561 775 2628, www.water-taxi.com) to encounter the region's wildlife as well as its celebrities – check the website or call for full information on the various tours and rates. Tours depart from Panama Hattie's seafood restaurant (11511 Ellison Wilson Road, 561 627 3943, www.panama-hatties.com).

INSIDER TIP

Manatee Queen tours (561 744 2191, www.manateequeen.com) in Jupiter take visitors on 2-hour long waterway tours past the homes of the town's rich and famous residents.

For Active Families

Bar-B-Ranch AGE 7 & UP

3500 Peaceful Ridge, Davie, 954 424 1060, www.bar-b-ranch.com.

Located west of Fort Lauderdale in the small community of Davie, Bar-B-Ranch is the place to saddle up and try your hand at horse riding on one of the ranch's scenic guided trails. Rides last 90 minutes. The ranch caters for first-time and experienced riders, but children must be aged 7 or over to join in. Rates start at US$45 per person and advance reservations are required.

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park

3109 East Sunrise Boulevard, 954 564 4521, www.floridastateparks.org/hughtaylorbirch.

Just north of Fort Lauderdale's beach, the Hugh Taylor Birch State Park stands on the edge of a calm intercoastal waterway where visitors can rent canoes and paddle a long freshwater lagoon. Walking trails lead through tropical hammocks and its shady picnic tables are a pleasant alternative to the beach.

Open *8am until sunset.* **Adm** *US$6 per car.*

Shopping

City Place – West Palm Beach ★

www.cityplace.com.

Located at the heart of downtown West Palm Beach, City Place is a swish, family-friendly shopping, dining and entertainment complex. There's a host of big-name chains and small independent stores to browse around, while a theatre and IMAX cinema provide evening entertainment. The Cheesecake Factory (see p. 205) is a recommended

dining option and young children must check out Sloan's ice cream and confectionery emporium where the funky toilets feature a magic misty mirror.

Las Olas Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale

www.lasolasboulevard.com.

This isn't the area to come with the children to souvenir shop, visit **Beach Place** for that (see p. 194), but older children will enjoy browsing through the clothes, gifts and accessories shops or sipping coffee in one of the cafés along this exclusive street.

Mizner Park

433 Plaza Real, Boca Raton, www.miznerpark.com.

Minutes from Boca Raton's beach, Mizner Park mall contains a range of shops and family-friendly places to eat. It is right next door to the town's impressive **Museum of Art** (*www.bocamuseum.org*).

Saw Grass Mills

12801 West Sunrise Boulevard, Sunrise, www.sawgrassmills.com.

At the other end of the shopping spectrum from Las Olas, Saw Grass Mills is a bargain-hunter's heaven, containing a branch of Ron Jon's surf shop and lots of factory outlets. If the children get bored with shopping, take them to **Wannado City** (*www.wannadocity.com*), a role-playing theme park where they get to act out different career choices.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

Miami

MODERATE

Big Pink ★

157 Collins Avenue, South Beach, 305 532 4700, www.bigpinkrestaurant.com.

One of the most family-friendly options on South Beach, Big Pink actively encourages children to eat here and not worry about distracting other diners by making a noise. Which is just as well, because this restaurant is famous for its long tables and bar stools, so there's little privacy but lots of fun to be had. The American-style food of pizzas, burgers, sandwiches and salads is prepared under the motto of 'Real Food for Real People' and the enormous portions are surprisingly good. I particularly recommend their all-day breakfasts.

Open *8am–midnight Mon–Wed, 8am–2am Thurs, 8am–5:30am Fri–Sun.* ***Main Courses*** *US$5–US$16.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Californian Pizza Kitchen

300 Miracle Mile, Coral Gables, 305 774 9940, www.cpk.com.

The Coral Gables branch of this small country-wide chain is one of the better family-friendly restaurants on the upmarket Miracle Mile. This is a laid-back, but still stylish, eatery whose menu includes a varied range of pizzas, pasta, sandwiches and salads. The children's menu for the

Jerry's Famous Deli, South Beach

under 10s has an unusually high number of options and choice of pizza, pasta and salads, including healthy options and free drink refills.

Open *11:30am–10pm Sun–Thurs, 11:30am–11pm Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$5–US$18.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Jerry's Famous Deli ★★★

1450 Collins Avenue, South Beach, 305 5328 030, www.jerrysfamousdeli.com.

Jerry's Famous Deli is a Miami institution and well frequented by locals and visitors alike. This large, white Art Deco building stands on the corner of Collins Avenue and Espanola Way and its decor, complete with large ceiling fans, old framed photographs and 50s' ambience, will hold even the most active child's attention. However, it's the enormous menu I love, including sandwiches, steaks, burgers, pizzas, pasta and fabulous breakfast dishes, but leave plenty of time to make up your mind, as the options are endless. You can sit outside and watch South Beach life pass by or inside in a large booth and be entertained by TV shows.

Open *24 hours.* ***Main Courses*** *US$11–US$20.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INEXPENSIVE

Pasha's ★

900 Lincoln Road, South Beach, 305 673 3919, www.pashas.com.

This small Miami chain has a number of branches dotted around the city, including a funky branch in the South Beach. Situated in the middle of the bustling Lincoln Road, older children and teens will love the comfy couches and small stalls, but all ages are welcome in this friendly restaurant. The healthy Mediterranean-style menu includes inexpensive wraps,

kebab platters and numerous vegetarian options.

Open *8am–midnight Sun–Thurs, 8am–1am Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$4–US$12.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

The Rest of the Southeast Coast

EXPENSIVE

The Bistro

2133 Hwy-1 (inside the Driftwood Plaza), Jupiter, 561 744 5054, www.thebistrojupiter.com.

This gourmet restaurant is one of the best places to eat in the Jupiter Beach area. The extensive menu features an excellent range of seafood and imaginative meat and vegetarian dishes, and if you want to eat in the early evening there's a reasonably priced Early Bird menu on offer. I particularly like the children's menu, which includes dishes such as angel hair pasta and chicken tempura as well as the usual burgers and, if the weather is fine, make sure you snag a table on the outside courtyard.

Open *5–10pm Sun–Thurs, 4–11pm Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$16–US$35, children's menu and starters US$10–US$15.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

MODERATE

The Cheesecake Factory ★

701 South Rosemary Avenue (at City Place), West Palm Beach, 561 802 3838, www.thecheesecakefactory.com.

Deep in the heart of West Palm Beach's City Place, the Cheesecake Factory is a national chain specialising in legendary cheesecakes. However, this chain is not all about dessert as its long breakfast, lunch and dinner menus prove. Expect to find a choice of premium burgers, pizzas, pastas, seafood, omelettes and even beer-battered fish and chips. The portions are huge so you'll need to pace yourself if you want to find room for a taste of just one of the many cheesecakes on offer. Pick from white chocolate raspberry truffle, fresh banana cream, chocolate coconut cream cheesecakes and many more. Dine inside the large, airy restaurant or on the outside terrace to watch the shoppers of City Walk go by.

Open *11am–11:30pm Mon–Thurs, 11am–12:30am Fri & Sat, 10am–11pm Sun.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$18.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

INSIDER TIP

Also inside Jupiter Beach's Driftwood Mall, Café Copenhagen (open 11am–3pm Mon–Fri, 5–9pm, Tues–Sat & 8am–2pm, Sat & Sun, *561 748 0495, www.cafecopenhagen.com*) serves an unusual array of reasonably priced Scandinavian cuisine.

INEXPENSIVE/MODERATE

Briny Riverfront Irish Bar & Restaurant

305 S Andrews Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, 954 376 4742, www.brinyirishpub.com.

Decorated with a distinctly nautical theme, the Briny is the place to head for if you're missing a family-friendly pub atmosphere and craving a pint of beer.

Children will love its crazy decor and scenic views of a small drawbridge over the river, where you can watch boats as they drift through. The menu is famous for its homemade burgers, large sandwiches and wraps, all served with fries, as well as good old pub grub including shepherd's pie and bangers and mash, making this a good choice if your children are missing familiar food.

Open *For lunch and dinner.* ***Main Courses*** *from US$8.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

INEXPENSIVE

Ugly Tuna

300 SW 1st Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, 954 467 8862, ***www.uglytunasaloona.com****.*

There are two sides to this informal and laid-back restaurant on Fort Lauderdale's popular Riverwalk. One side features an outdoor and at times noisy bar, but the other, better for families, side includes a quieter seating area with pleasant views overlooking the river itself. The menu is mainly seafood and includes traditional English fish and chips for US$10 – there is also a range of sandwiches, salads and pastas, but few options for vegetarians. The small children's menu includes fish and chicken dishes and comes along with fish-themed cartoons to colour in.

Open *For lunch and dinner.* ***Main Courses*** *US$5–US$10.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

Miami

EXPENSIVE/VERY EXPENSIVE

Ritz Carlton Key Biscayne GREEN

455 Grand Bay Drive, Key Biscayne, 305 365 4500, ***www.ritzcarlton.com****.*

Ritz Carlton has created an exclusive tropical island sanctuary in this large oceanfront resort. The beach area is very family friendly and the resort's swimming pools are nestled amongst acres of tropically landscaped gardens. The Ritz Kids programme caters for the 5 to 12-year-old age range and features tons of activities that will make them not want to leave the resort. And after a hard day taking in Miami's attractions, the casual oceanfront restaurants are a perfect place to end the day.

Rooms *402.* ***Rates*** *Winter US$450–US$590 double suite, low season US$260–US$490 double suite.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

EXPENSIVE

Loews Miami Beach ★

1601 Collins Avenue, South Beach, 305 604 1601, ***www.loewshotels.com****.*

Situated smack bang in the middle of the Art Deco district, you can stay in style on South Beach with children in this luxury,

Miami Beach

The majority of Miami's accommodation is located on the beach, as this is where most visitors stay. Many of South Beach's hotels don't accept children, rooms are on the small side in the old Art Deco buildings and this is an adult area at night. Exceptions include the **Essex House Hotel** (1001 Collins Avenue, *305 534 2700, www.essexhotel.com*, rooms from US$120). With some of South Beach's hotels you have to pay to park in a municipal car park overnight as the old buildings have limited onsite facilities.

As South Beach gives way to Miami's central and north beach areas, sprawling high-rise resorts characterise the oceanfront and families won't have any problems finding accommodation. Budget options here include **Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel** (8701 Collins Avenue, *305 865 6661, www.hojo.com*, rooms US$80), and the Best Western **Atlantic Beach Resort** (4101 Collins Avenue, *305 673 3337, www.bestwesternflorida.com*, rooms from US$120).

Miami's high season is January to March, when visitors arrive to escape winter elsewhere. Low season runs from June to August, when temperatures, humidity and rainfall can be high, but accommodation rates drop by as much as 50%. In between these two periods, the weather is still hot and bargains can still be found.

child-friendly resort. Butting up against the waterfront, guests can either sunbathe on the sand or laze around a large, landscaped pool. The hotel's SoBe Kids Camp offers full and half-day programmes of activities for 4 to 12-year- olds such as arts and crafts, sandcastle contests and movies, plus an evening programme on Fridays and Saturdays. Teenagers are catered for with PBteen poolside cabanas where they can listen to music, play games and generally hang out with mum and dad around.

Rooms** 790 rooms, 52 suites. **Rates** Winter from US$400, low season from US$250. Valet parking US$35, self-parking is available in a public garage. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** **In room

EXPENSIVE/MODERATE

Hotel Astor ★

956 Washington Avenue, South Beach, 305 531 8081, www.hotelastor.com.

Standing across the road from the Wolfsonian Museum (see p. 190), this Art Deco boutique hotel is one of the most elegant places to stay in South Beach. Away from the main party drag, Hotel Astor is an oasis of calm – special soundproof windows help block any noise from outside – and style. The lobby and

Biscayne Bay

restaurant area are both stunning and although the rooms are more basic they are clean, comfortable and recently refurbished. There's no onsite pool, but the sands of South Beach are only a short walk away and the hotel's resort fee (US$12 per day) covers the use of beach chairs, umbrella and towels.

Rooms *40.* ***Rates*** *US$120–US$220.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

The Rest of the Southeast Coast

EXPENSIVE/VERY EXPENSIVE

Boca Raton Resort & Club ★★ GREEN

501 E Camino Real, Boca Raton, 561 395 3000, www.bocaresort.com.

This distinctive 1920s' luxury resort is set in large landscaped grounds that contain a number

The Rest of the Southeast Coast

Deerfield Beach has two beachside options: the Comfort Inn Oceanside (50 S Ocean Drive, *954 428 0650, www.comfortinnoceanside.com*, rooms US$120–US$200), which has a large pool with a waterslide and mini golf on site, and the **Howard Johnson Plaza Resort** (2096 NE 2nd Street, *954 428 2850, www.hojo.com*, rooms US$130–US$270). At Boca Raton, the **Best Western University Inn** (2700 N Federal Hwy, *561 395 5225, www.bestwesternflorida.com*, rooms US$70–US$90) is a good budget chain option. And in downtown West Palm Beach, the **Hyatt Place** (295 Lakeview Avenue, *561 655 1454, www.westpalmbeach.place.hyatt.com*, is an excellent family-friendly hotel (rooms US$120–US210).

Elsewhere in Miami

Key Biscayne's laid-back atmosphere makes it a popular choice for visiting families and one that is still close to excellent beaches and all the major attractions. One of the nicest and cheapest accommodation options in this area is the **Silver Sands Beach Resort** (*305 361 5441, www.key-biscayne.com/accom/silversands/*, rooms US$129–US$189, cottages US$279–US$329, weekly rates available). A decent chain option in Coral Gables is the **Extended Stay America** (3640 SW 22nd Street, *305 443 7444, www.extendedstayhotels.com*, rooms US$100–US$110). And for those needing to stay near Miami's airport there are a host of chain motels to choose from, including the **Airways Inn and Suites** (5001 NW 36th Street, *305 883 4700, www.airwaysairporthotel.com*, rooms from US$70), which provides a 24-hour airport shuttle service.

If you're also planning to split your visit with the Florida Keys and Everglades, you can stay in the cheaper chain motels in Florida City, from which it will take about an hour to drive into Miami. See the Family-Friendly Accommodation section of The Florida Keys and Everglades chapter, p. 211.

of leisure facilities and its own half-mile-long private beach. I like this resort because the sheer amount of activities guests can enjoy ensures that children won't have time to get bored, and if parents want time off alone, Camp Boca is an excellent children's programme for ages 3 to 12. In addition to the numerous restaurants, a number of family-orientated films are screened in the evening to keep guests occupied well into the night.

Rooms *1,043.* ***Rates*** *Winter US$290–US$760 double, low season US$190–US$495 double.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

Jupiter Beach Spa & Resort ★ GREEN

5 North A1A, Jupiter, 866 943 0950, www.jupiterbeachresort.com.

Straddling the edge of a secluded section of Jupiter Beach, this relaxed, luxurious resort is one of the finest family-friendly hotels in the area. The leisure facilities, which include a large pool and tennis courts, are all first class and if you don't want to eat at the resort, Jupiter Square, which contains a supermarket and numerous places to eat, is a short walk away. The rooms are spacious, comfortable and well equipped and come with a private balcony and expansive

views. If you want time away from the beach, there are numerous day trip options to choose from including a clutch of family-friendly attractions and West Palm Beach.

Rooms *159. Rates US$130–US$410.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE

The Pelican Grand Resort ★★

2000 North Ocean Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, 954 568 9431, ***www.pelicanbeach.com****.*

Just north of Fort Lauderdale's beach, this popular resort is ideal for families. The rooms have a separate living room area so parents can relax and watch TV while children sleep, and all have private balconies overlooking a glorious beach. A fabulous wrap-around oceanfront veranda is a perfect place to relax while the children mess around in the heated pool, and the onsite shops sell ice cream and children's confectionery. But it's the small touches, such as board games that can be borrowed in the lobby, that make this exceptionally friendly, laid-back resort one of the best places to stay in the southeast.

Rooms *159.* ***Rates*** *US$90–US$120. Valet parking US$24.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

8 The Florida Keys & Everglades

THE EVERGLADES

Campground

Information

Attractions
Biscayne National Park **9**
Clyde Butcher Gallery **4**
The Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center **7**
Everglades Hostel **8**
Everglades Rentals & Eco Adventures **2**
Oasis Visitor Center **5**
Shark Valley Visitor Center **6**

Dining
Oyster House Restaurant **1**

Accommodation
Swamp Cottage **3**

0
10 mi
0
10 km
N
997
826
112
836
MIAMI
Tamiami Trail
41
6
Miccosukee Indian Village
Tram Tour/ Shark Valley Bike Trail
Chekika
Richmond Dr.
Krome Ave.
Florida's Turnpike
874
1
997
NATIONAL PARK
Homestead
SW 137th Ave.
North Canal Dr.
SW 328th St.
8
Florida City
9
Dante Fascell Visitor Center
BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK
Boca Chita Key
Adams Key
Elliott Key
Pay-hay-okee Overlook Trail & Observation Tower
9336
Long Pine Key
7
Palm Dr.
Card Sound Rd.
Royal Palm Visitor Center, Anhinga Trail, Gumbo-Limbo Trail
Everglades Alligator Farm
Old Ingraham
Ernest Coe
1
Hell's Bay Canoe Trail
Nine Mile Pond Canoe Trail
Nine Mile Pond Noble Hammock Canoe Trail
North Nest Key
KEY LARGO
JOHN PENNEKAMP CORAL REEF STATE PARK
ATLANTIC OCEAN
THE FLORIDA KEYS
Florida Bay
Tallahassee
Orlando
FLORIDA
Tampa
Area of detail
Miami

Attractions
Florida Keys Wild Bird Center 9
John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park 12
National Key Deer Refuge 1
Tarpon Feeding at Robbie's Marina 4
Theater of the Sea 6
The Turtle Hospital 2
Dining
Key Largo Coffee House 11
Key's Fisheries 3
Morada Bay 5
Mrs Mac's Kitchen 10
Accommodation
Cheeca Lodge & Spa 8
The Moorings Village 7
EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK
To Miami
Key Largo
Florida Bay
Key Largo
Tavernier
Tavernier Key
Windley Key
Plantation Key
Islamorada
Upper Matecumbe Key
Lower Matecumbe Key
Fiesta Key
Conch Key
Long Key
Highway
Overseas
Duck Key
Grassy Key
Vaca Key
Boot Key
Knight's Key
Pigeon Key
The Florida Keys Marathon Airport
Marathon
Hawk Channel
Coffins Patch
Sombrero Reef
Delta Shoal
Bahia Honda Key
Big Pine Key
Summerland Key
Spanish Harbor Key
Little Torch Key
Ramrod Key
Cudjoe Key
Sugarloaf Key
Sugarloaf Channel
Boca Chica Key
Stock Island
Key West
Key West Intl. Airport
See "Key West" map
To the Dry Tortugas (70 miles)
Intracoastal Waterway
Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary
GULF OF MEXICO
Straits of Florida
ATLANTIC OCEAN
0 15 mi
0 15 km
N
Tallahassee
Orlando
Tampa
FLORIDA
Miami
Area of detail

The two regions that make up Florida's southern tip couldn't be more different in personality. The vast, endangered, Everglades tumble off dry land as Florida falls into the Gulf of Mexico and provide many ways for outdoor-loving families to delve deep into intricate ecosystems and encounter endless birdlife, fragile flora and the ubiquitous alligator. There is nothing in the way of attractions, theme parks or even many roads in this region, making it a haven for those seeking an off the beaten track experience alongside opportunities to kayak, hire and cycle. Dangling off the edge of Florida, the chain of islands leading east to west known as the Florida Keys claims the highest average temperatures in the US and is the place to kick back and relax. Families that travel this far south are seeking sun and sea but not necessarily sand, as there are surprisingly few beaches to be found on these islands. The main draw for children in the Upper and Middle Keys is their many animal-focused attractions, where they can learn about rescue and rehabilitation programmes and get up close and personal to all kinds of marine species and birdlife. Key West, at the end of Hwy-1, is bursting with character and characters, and its vibrant, if eccentric, atmosphere and rich history of pirates, sunken treasure and wreckers has a natural appeal to young visitors. However, both these unique regions constantly negotiate a precarious existence in a region dominated by water. Any visit to either the Everglades or the Florida Keys is enriched by getting off dry land to experience reef-protected translucent seas, home to a myriad of exotic fish and colourful corals, or the tangled maze of mangrove-lined waterways that blend into these two incredible landscapes.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

The Florida Keys Visitor Centre on Hwy-1 at MM106 (Bayside) is located in Key Largo as you arrive at the Keys. (*1 800 822 1088, www.keylargochamber.org,* open daily 9am–6pm).

In Key West, visitor information can be obtained at the Key West Chamber of Commerce, 510 Greene Street, Key West (*305 294 2587, www.keywestchamber.org,* open 8:30am–6:30pm Mon–Fri, 8:30am–6pm Sat & Sun).

Tourist information centres are also located in Islamorada at Hwy-1 at MM83.2 (Bayside) (*305 664 4503, www.islamoradachamber.com*), Marathon at Hwy-1 at MM53.5 (Bayside) (*305 743 5417, www.floridakeysmarathon.com,* open 9am–5pm daily) and the Lower Keys at Hwy-1 at MM31 (Oceanside) (*305 872 2411, www.lowerkeyschamber.com*).

The UK website for visitor information to the Florida Keys is *www.fla-keys.co.uk* and for more information *01564 794 555* – click the 'Keys Kash' button on this site to find out about

any deals or offers currently available.

The Everglades Chamber of Commerce (*239 695 31 72, www.evergladeschamber.net*, open 9am–4pm daily) is housed in a large wooden triangular building at the junction of Hwy-41 and SR-29 north of Everglades City and is good for information on the National Park and various tour operators in the region. On the east side of the Everglades, the visitor centre (*305 245 9180, www.tropicaleverglades.com*, opening times vary) is located on the same grounds as the Fairway Inn on Hwy-1 in Florida City and contains information on the Everglades, Florida Keys and Miami. Also check *www.evergladesonline.com* for more information on this area.

Orientation

There is only one road through the Florida Keys: Hwy-1, also known as the Overseas Highway because its 42 bridges connect over 100 islands along the 127-mile route. Every address along Hwy-1 is identified by its Mile Markers (MM), indicated by small signs dotted the length of the road, starting at MM0 in Key West at the junction of Fleming and Whitehead Streets and ending at MM127 just south of Homestead. Each address is also identified as either Bayside or Oceanside, indicating which side of the highway it is on, with everything on the north being Bayside and everything on the south Oceanside.

In the Everglades, SR-29 branches south from Hwy-41 in the west to lead into Everglades City and Chokoloskee on the coast. In the west, SR-9336 travels from Florida City to Flamingo and is the only road into the Everglades National Park.

Arriving

By Plane The main airport in the Florida Keys is the Key West International Airport, situated in the northeast corner of the island on 3491 South Roosevelt Boulevard (*305 296 7223, www.keywestinternationalairport.com*), which receives flights from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Fort Myers, Orlando, Tampa and Naples operated by various American airlines (see p. 35). Most visitors to the Keys who arrive by air fly into Miami International Airport (see p. 180) and hire a car (see p. 31). Miami is also convenient for the eastern side of the Everglades. For visitors to the west side of the Everglades,

FUN FACT All-American Road

The Overseas Highway is the only designated All-American Road in Florida. All-American Roads are recognised as visitor destinations in their own right due to their cultural, historical, scenic or archaeological qualities. There are only 30 other such roads in the whole of the US.

Goodland Island

If you're driving to the Everglades from the west, Goodland is a little-known place to break a journey with children. This ramshackle old fishing village is situated southeast of Marco Island off SR-92, which branches south from Hwy-41. You'll find a cluster of friendly waterfront seafood restaurants, including **Little Bar** (*239 394 5663*), **Old Marco Lodge Crab House** (*239 642 7227*) and **Stan's Idle Hour** (*239 394 3041*), and **Island Woman** (*239 642 6166*), a quirky gift, clothes and jewellery shop. As you drive out of Goodland back to Hwy-41, the bridge off the island provides a stunning view over the Ten Thousand Islands, a large cluster of tiny deserted mangrove islands strewn around the Everglades' northwest coastline.

the closest airport is Naples Municipal Airport (*239 643 0733, www.flynaples.com*), which runs regular scheduled flights between Naples and Key West operated by Gulf Coast Airways (*239 403 3020, www.gulfcoastairways.com*).

By Car From central Florida or the east coast including Miami, take the Florida Turnpike to Florida City and join Hwy-1, the main road to the Florida Keys. From the west, join SR-997 at either the junction with Hwy-27 or Hwy-41 to join Hwy-1 at Florida City. Key Largo is about half an hour from Florida City, Key West is approximately a further 2 hours drive.

INSIDER TIP

Hwy-1 is extremely busy with traffic into the Keys on a Friday afternoon, especially in winter, and out of the Keys on a Sunday afternoon. Avoid travelling at these times, as you will end up sitting in your car for hours.

The only way to reach the Everglades is by car. From the west, join Hwy-41, the main road into the Everglades, at Naples. From the east, follow directions to Florida City (see p. 239), the gateway into the Everglades.

By Ferry Key West is served by the Key West Express (*1866 593 3779, www.seakeywestexpress.com*) ferry service from Fort Myers and Marco Island (see p. 116).

Getting Around

The only way to get around the Florida Keys and Everglades is by car. For details of car hire, see p. 31.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Children's Top Five Attractions

1 **Snorkelling** at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park; p. 229.

FUN FACT **Highway of Bridges**

Over 18 miles of the Overseas Highway consist of bridges, with the longest spanning nearly 7 miles.

2 **Feeding** tarpon at Robbie's Marina; p. 226.

3 **Learning** about the environment at the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center; p. 222.

4 **Walking** the length of Key West's eclectic Duval Street; p. 224.

5 **Taking** a tram or bicycle ride through Shark Valley; p. 235.

Child-Friendly Festivals & Events

In late October the week-long Fantasy Fest (*www.fantasyfest.net*), Key West's annual colourful Bacchanal, takes place. If you're planning a visit at this time, book accommodation well in advance.

Earth Day

Earth Day is celebrated around the world every April and numerous places in the Keys seize the day to party in a family-friendly way for the planet. Join in the celebrations at Bahia Honda State Park (see p. 230), the Dolphin Research Center at MM59 (Bayside) on Grassy Key and Cheeca Lodge in Islamorada (see p. 241). Activities at these locations include live music, sand sculpting, a puppet show and environmental education booths. For more information check the events section of the UK website for visitor information to the Florida Keys (*www.fla-keys.co.uk*).

Independence Day Celebrations, Islamorada

Every 4th July, Islamorada, the Village of Islands, celebrates with a family day of activities at the beach and at Founders Park, MM87. The festivities include a bouncy castle, clowns and family playground.

Pirates in Paradise

305 296 9694, www.piratesinparadise.com.

Over a long weekend in late November or early December, Key West and Fort Taylor are transformed into a pirates' stronghold and all visitors are encouraged to shiver their timbers and join in the celebrations. Pirate entertainers and arts and craft stalls are enjoyed on land while out to sea, tall ships and pirate sails take to the waters in this celebration of Key West's maritime history.

INSIDER TIP

Whatever the time of year, bring plenty of mosquito repellent when visiting the Florida Keys and Everglades.

Key West

Key West stands at the southernmost point of continental USA

KEY WEST

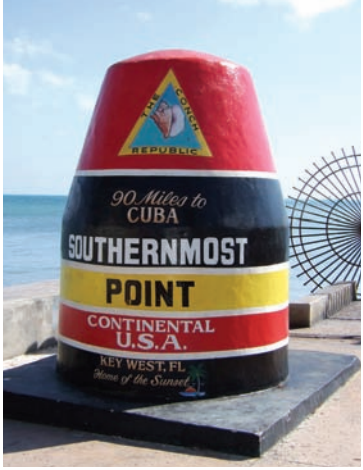
Attractions
Bahama Village **12**
Ernest Hemingway House & Museum **13**
Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center **11**
Harborwalk **5**
Heritage House Museum **9**
The Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory **17**
Key West Cemetery **1**
Lighthouse Museum **14**
Little White House **10**
Mel Fisher Maritime Museum **8**
Pirate Soul Museum **6**
Southernmost Point **18**
Wreck Ashore! **7**

Dining
Camille's Restaurant **15**
Conch Republic Seafood Company **4**
Mangia Mangia **2**

Accommodation
Casa Marina **16**
Island City House Hotel **3**

and its distinct devil-may-care identity is more influenced by its Caribbean neighbours than any legislation from Washington – hardly surprising considering it's only 90 miles from Havana but 150 miles from the nearest Wal-Mart. Proud of its lawless past, rich with pirates and wreckers, Key West and its party atmosphere has a noticeable ambivalence towards the present, and its sun-drenched streets will impress on children a very different experience of the Sunshine State from Miami or Orlando.

The best way to start a visit is to walk around the vibrant streets of the attractive Old Town, Key West's historic heart, but if the heat's too much, or your children are too small to walk, take a trolley tour instead (see p. 156), which will also provide some insight into the city's attractions. Most of Key West's



Southernmost Point, Key West

attractions are on or around Duval Street, the famous shop- and restaurant-filled road, which leads from the waterfront near Mallory Square to the southernmost point. One block to the west, a large red, yellow and black buoy marks the southern tip of continental USA.

INSIDER TIP

Parking can be a nightmare in Key West as there are limited options in its cramped downtown. The best bet is the municipal car park at the corner of Grinnell and Caroline Streets. US$2 per hour or US$13 per day.

At the other end of Duval Street, near the waterfront, life picks up apace. The nearby tourist-focused Mallory Square, with its free-roaming chickens and multitude of market stalls bursting with all kinds of tourist fare from hula girl garlands to hand-woven hats, is brilliant to explore with children of all ages. Tourists, locals and street performers gather in Mallory Square each evening to celebrate the setting sun (*www.sunsetcelebration.org*) – ironic considering this is one of the worst places on the island to see the sun set – but an essential part of any visit nonetheless.

INSIDER TIP

Watch your wallet in Mallory Square; it's a favourite haunt for pickpockets.

Tourist train passes Sloppy Joe's

Famous Key West Residents

It's impossible to separate Key West's history from that of its most famous residents. Undoubtedly the most well known is author Ernest Hemingway, whose beautiful old Spanish colonial-style home on Whitehead Street, where he wrote A Farewell to Arms, is one of Key West's most visited historic sights AGE 10 & UP (*305 294 1136, www.hemingwayhome.com*). Hemingway was a regular at Sloppy Joe's, although it's debatable whether the bar of the same name on the corner of Greene and Duval Streets was really the author's favourite watering hole; Captain Tony's Saloon on Greene Street, once also called Sloppy Joe's, claims this honour.

While never a resident, President Harry S. Truman was a frequent visitor to Key West and the **Little White House** AGE 12 & UP on Front Street (*305 294 9911, www.trumanlittlewhitehouse.com*) was his favourite retreat – it functioned as the White House for 175 days of his presidency. Tours of this simple house provide a glimpse into a small piece of American history.

Tucked away on Caroline Street, the appealing **Heritage House Museum** AGE 12 & UP (*305 296 3573, www.heritagehousemusuem.org*) contains a charming garden cottage where poet Robert Frost came to write in the winter. Tour guides dish up gossip on some of the famous visitors, including Tennessee Williams and Gloria Swanson.

With the exception of the six-toed cats that live in the grounds, the Ernest Hemingway House & Museum are not engaging for small children.

West of Duval Street, off Petronia Street, is an area known as **Bahama Village,** where the streets, lined with old wooden houses – the former homes of Cuban cigar rollers – are an oasis of calm away from Key West's more touristy districts. Shop for souvenirs at Bahama Village Market.

East of Duval Street, with an entrance at the corner of Passover Lane and Margaret Street, the **Key West Cemetery** might seem a morbid place to bring children, but with gravestones featuring such epitaphs as 'I told you I was sick', 'devoted fan of singer Julio Iglesias' and 'a good citizen for 65 of his 108 years', a visit can be more fun than you think. Pick up a free self-guided tour and listen out for planes as they drone over the gravestones en route to the nearby airport.

INSIDER TIP

Key West is a cycle-friendly town, and visitors and locals use bikes to get around. Bikes with children's attachments can be rented from **Sunshine Rentals** (*305 294 9990, www.sunshinekeywest.com*), with outlets on

Truman Avenue, Duval, Eaton and Greene Streets and **A & M Rentals** (*305 296 0515, www.amscooterskeywest.com*) on Truman Avenue and South Street.

Key West's Family-Friendly Attractions

Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center ★★★ AGE 5 & UP

35 East Quay Road (opposite Fort Zachary Taylor State Historic Site), 305 809 4750, www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/eco_discovery.html.

Owned and created by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, the Eco-Discovery Center is one of the finest child-focused exhibits in Key West. The centre contains interactive recreations of the landscapes found in the Keys, such as a Living Reef – peering through the plate glass at the myriad of sealife and living coral is as good as snorkelling but doesn't involve getting wet.

One exhibit allows you to 'Be the Manager' and decide, after listening to all the arguments, what you would do if you were in charge of the Florida Keys' different natural environments. And have the outcomes of your decisions revealed.

See the mock-up of Aquarius, the world's only underwater ocean laboratory, where marine scientists live and work; NASA astronauts are sent here to get used to isolation. Other activities include a virtual 1,600-foot dive, the opportunity to check local weather and reef conditions and an impressive film about the Keys made by the cinematographer from *Free Willy*.

Time** 1 hr. **Open** 9am–4pm Tues–Sat. **Adm** Free. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

An old WW2 Mohawk combat ship docked at the waterfront adjacent to the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center has been converted into a museum (*305 799 1143, www.ussmohawk.org*).

The Key West Butterfly & Nature Conservatory AGE 4 & UP

1316 Duval Street, 305 296 2988, www.keywestbutterfly.com.

If the intensity of downtown Key West becomes too much, head to this relatively new attraction and take time out in a large tropical conservatory. Visitors wind their way through a glass-enclosed landscaped habitat filled with flowers, plants, waterfalls, exotic birds and – the stars of the show – hundreds of butterflies of all shapes, sizes and

FUN FACT **Conch Republic**

In Key West, the term 'conch' (pronounced conk) is used to describe someone born there. The whole city is known as the Conch Republic after it unofficially declared a one-minute war and secession from the United States in protest at road blocks set up to search for Cuban refugees in the 1980s.

Eco-Discovery Center

species. At the onsite learning centre you can watch a film exploring the life cycle of butterflies and take in a range of other interesting exhibits – look out for the live caterpillars!

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm daily* ***Adm*** *US$12, US$8.50 children aged 4–12, under 4s free.* ***Amenities***

Pirate Soul Museum

★ AGE 4 & UP

524 Front and Simonton Streets, 305 292 1113, www.piratesoul.com.

There's nothing subtle about this proud-to-be-a-pirate family attraction, which urges all visitors to swash their buckle and get in touch with their inner Captain Kidd. Any child remotely interested in pirates will love this place, as its themed exhibitions contain fascinating artefacts including a genuine pirates' treasure chest and original Jolly Roger flag. Recreations of Jamaica's Port Royal and the demise of Blackbeard bring the so-called Golden Age of Piracy to life and the creators of this imaginative museum claim that if visitors look closely enough they'll spy a pirate's soul.

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun.* ***Adm*** *US$14, US$8 children aged 10 and under.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Key West's Child-Friendly Tours

Ghost Tours of Key West

★★ AGE 5 & UP

These creepy tours are a fun way of discovering Key West's ghostly goings on for any child not afraid of things that go bump in the night. The lantern-lit tours, led through the shadowy corners of the city's darkest streets, last around 90 minutes and cover a mile and a half of Key West's 'most haunted' streets. Buy a ticket if you dare from the Ghost Tour shop at the corner of Duval and Fleming

A Wrecking Good Time

In the mid-19th century, Key West was the richest city in the southern US thanks to wrecking – the 'salvaging' of goods and wares from ships stricken on the region's perilous reefs. To find out more about Key West's wrecking history, pay a visit to **Wreck Ashore!** AGE 4 & UP (*305 292 8990, www.shipwreckhistoreum.com*), a wooden shipwreck historeum in Mallory Square where actors and exhibits recreate the shady world of Key West's wreckers in 1856. Try the **Mel Fisher Maritime Museum** AGE 7 & UP on Greene Street (*305 294 2633, www.melfisher.org*) where discoveries from wrecks stretching back to the late 15th century have been spruced back to their former glory. For a panoramic view of Key West's treacherous waters and to learn more about its lighthouse, visit the **Lighthouse Museum** AGE 5 & UP on Whitehead Street (*305 294 0012, www.kwahs.com/lighthouse.htm*).

Wreck Ashore!

Streets, open 11am–11pm (*305 294 9255, www.hauntedtours.com*).

Time *1½ hr. Tours depart at 8pm and 9pm daily.* ***Tickets*** *US$15, US$10 children aged 4–12, under 4s free.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

Trolley Tours ★★ AGE 3 & UP

Get to know Key West and its history via its informative and fun trolley tours. Two companies run regular tours: the **Conch Tour Train's** (*305 294 5161, www.conchtourtrain.com*) 90-minute tours depart at regular intervals from Mallory Square from 9am to 4:30pm, or you can hop on and off the **Old Town Trolley** at any of its stops around the city (*305 296 6688, www.historictours.com*). Tickets to both cost US$29 and US$14 for children aged 4–12, under 4s free. Call ahead for wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

Key West's Shopping Hot Spots

Duval Street, with its eccentric mix of clothes and gift shops, and arts, crafts and cigar stalls, is a shopper's paradise. Highlights include **Fast Buck Freddie's** (*305 294 2007, www.fastbuckfreddies.com*), a department store Key West style, but allow plenty

Key West Lime Shoppe

of time to browse the whole street. Tucked away towards the marina, **Harborwalk** offers brightly painted arts and craft shops and stalls but no visit to Key West is ever complete without a trip to Kermit's **Key West Lime Shoppe** on the corner of Elizabeth and Greene Streets (*800 376 0806, www.keylimeshop.com*), where you'll be amazed at just how many things you can do with a Key Lime – I've seen the eccentric owner pretending to fling pies at the tram tours as they pass by his shop. Also pay a visit to **Pepper's of Key West** on Greene Street (*305 295 9333, www.peppersofkeywest.com*) to choose between a mind-boggling array of hot sauces and even draw up a stool at their tasting bar to try a selection before you buy. And if your children are bored with writing postcards, head to the **Key West Kite Company** on Greene Street (*305 296 2535, www.keywestkitecompany.com*) where for US$20 you can send a message on a coconut instead and buy a kite or two.

The Florida Keys' Top Animal Attractions

Florida Keys Wild Bird Center ★ AGE 3 & UP

Hwy-1 at MM93.6 (Bayside), Tavernier, 305 852 4486, www.fkwbc.org.

Dedicated to nursing and rehabilitating sick and injured birds, the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center consists of several large, ramshackle cages housing rescue birds, most of which are released back into the wild as soon as possible. However, it's the more permanent residents that provide the entertainment. Pickle the cockatiel will do anything to grab children's attention and imitates a telephone answering machine and the 'beeps' of a reversing truck to keep them entertained. All kinds of animals have made their home around the centre and you'll spy lazing cats and feeding squirrels as you wander around. At 3:30pm the wild birds are fed by the ocean – if you hear footsteps behind you, it's likely to be a cheeky pelican seeing if you've left the odd snack in your pocket.

Fort Jefferson & the Dry Tortugas

The Florida Keys don't end at Key West, but 70 miles further west at the **Dry Tortugas** (***www.nps.gov/drto***) – a designated National Park consisting of seven islands, the largest featuring the huge Fort Jefferson. These remote grassy islands are home to an amazing array of bird and marine life and a perfect day out for families who love to snorkel, bird watch or hike. Children can pick up a free Junior Ranger handbook from the visitor centre to learn about the park's history and wildlife. Two ferries serve the park from Key West: the **Yankee Freedom** (*305 294 7009, **www.yankeefreedom.com***) departs at 8am from the seaport on Margaret Street and returns at 5pm (tickets US$160, US$120 under 16s, food and snorkelling equipment included). The faster and cheaper **Sunny Days Catamaran** (*305 296 5556, **www.drytortugas.com***) departs Key West at 8am and returns by 5pm (tickets US$145 adults, US$100 under 16s, food, snorkelling equipment and a tour of the fort included). At the time of writing, seaplane trips to the park are not running, check ***www.seaplanesofkeywest.com*** for up-to-date information. An entrance fee to the park itself is a further US$5 for visitors over 17.

***Time** 30 min. **Open** daily during daylight hours. **Adm** Free, donations requested.*

National Key Deer Refuge

★ AGE 3 & UP

*Hwy-1 at MM33 (Bayside), Big Pine Key, 305 872 0774, **www.fws.gov/nationalkeydeer**.*

Key deer, with their enormous brown eyes, large ears and white-tipped tails, are as cute as they are endangered, and most of the remaining population lives on Big Pine Key. Although they are free to wander wherever they like, the refuge is the best place to catch a glimpse of the deer, with good times for viewing being early in the morning or at dusk when the temperatures are cooler. If you're here in the spring, visiting the refuge is a must, as this is the season when hinds give birth to tiny fawns. Never feed the deer, it's illegal and reduces their chances of survival.

***Time** 1 hr. **Open** Sunrise–sunset daily. The visitor centre inside the Big Pine Shopping Center is open 8am–5pm Mon–Fri. **Adm** Free.*

INSIDER TIP

The speed limit of a section of Hwy-1 drops to 45mph in the day and 35mph at night as it passes through Big Pine Key in an attempt to reduce the number of deer deaths through collisions with cars.

Tarpon Feeding at Robbie's Marina ★★ AGE 3 & UP

*Hwy-1 at MM84.5 (Bayside), Islamorada, 305 664 9814, **www.robbies.com/tarpon**.*

The owners of Robbie's Marina first fed an injured tarpon

around two decades ago. Today, masses of these giant fish swish around in the water waiting to be fed. Spending US$3 on a bucket of fish to feed the tarpon guarantees slapstick fun, as they jump high out of the water to snatch food from your hands before splashing back into the sea. A webcam is poised over the feeding spot, so your children can text their mates to get them to watch the action online at home. And once your fish run out, Robbie's Hungry Tarpon café and the jewellery stalls make this a friendly place to hang out. Alternatively, join one of the regular snorkelling trips or eco tours.

Time *30 min.* ***Open*** *8am–5pm.* ***Adm*** *US$1 to enter the marina.*

Theater of the Sea ★ AGE 3 & UP

Hwy-1 at MM84.5 (Oceanside), Islamorada, 305 664 2431, ***www.theaterofthesea.com****.*

Theater of the Sea opened in 1946 and is the second-oldest marine park in the world. Despite its age, the park has risen to the challenge of keeping up with the modern world and its enormous lagoon and holding tanks are filled with rescue animals that can't be released back into the wild. You'll see turtles, countless tropical birds, iguanas, a rather shy owl and an ever-increasing number of cats, which live around the gift shop.

It's easy to spend a day here, as there are lots of animal shows to watch, with performing sea lions, dolphins and parrots plus a bottomless boat ride to take. A small beach area, where visitors can snorkel with parrot and angel fish, is open from 11am–4pm and is a good opportunity for children who don't want to snorkel in the sea to see some marine life. A number of animal encounters are in place for an extra fee (book in advance) for those who want to interact with sea lions, sting rays or dolphins, but Theater of the Sea endeavours to keep the amount of time its animals interact with humans to a minimum. There are also snorkel cruises into the Atlantic and Florida Bay for US$69 adults and US$45 children (children must be aged over 3 to participate).

Time *3 hr.* ***Open*** *9:30am–5pm daily, ticket office closes at 4pm.* ***Adm*** *US$27, US$20 children aged 3–12, under 3s free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

The Turtle Hospital ★★ AGE 5 & UP

Hwy-1 at MM48.5 (Bayside), Marathon, 305 743 2552, ***www.turtlehospital.org****.*

Mimi at Theater of the Sea

FUN FACT **Tarpon**

Tarpons live in both fresh and salt water. Adult fish swallow their prey whole and can grow up to 8 feet long.

The Turtle Hospital started life as a motel with a saltwater pool; however, when a storm surge from Hurricane William damaged the building, the hotel was ditched and the owners concentrated their efforts on saving sea turtles instead. Today, visitors are given a fascinating glimpse into the efforts to care for the injured sea turtles brought to the hospital. Most are rehabilitated into the wild but others, like April who is almost blind and has to be hand fed, have become permanent residents.

Time *1½ hr. Tours depart at 10am, 1pm & 4pm daily, reservations are required.* ***Adm*** *US$15 adults, US$7.50 children aged 4–12.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

INSIDER TIP

World Parrot Mission (Hwy-1 at MM99, Bayside, Key Largo, (*305 453 1800, **www.worldparrotmission.org***) aims to help parrots that have been abandoned by their owners. The mission's gift shop is open 10am to 6pm Tuesday to Sunday and the director, along with a number of birds, meet and greet on Thursdays from 11am to 4pm.

Getting Out onto the Water

Biscayne National Park

★★ **ALL AGES**

*9700 SW 328th Street, Homestead, 305 230 1100, **www.nps.gov/bisc**.*

You'll wonder where on earth you're going when driving down 328th Street (North Canal Drive) surrounded by farmland and incongruous views of the Homestead Miami Speedway, but when the road runs out 9 miles after the turning off Hwy-1, you'll arrive at Convoy Point and Biscayne National Park. North of the actual Keys, 95% of this park is under water, and the visitor centre, with its touch table for children and family-fun activities such as jetty bingo, is well set up to engage children with the surrounding environment.

However, you need to get out on the water to make a visit worthwhile. Glass-bottom boat tours depart at 10am and 1:30pm (US$45, US$30 under 12s) and allow visitors to view some of the most astonishing coral reefs in the U.S. Snorkelling trips leave

Swimming with Dolphins in the Keys

A number of attractions along Hwy-1 offer visitors the opportunity to interact or swim with dolphins. For more information about how to choose which organisation to visit, see p. 35.

A recovering patient enjoys a swim at the Turtle Hospital

once a day at 1:30pm (US$40–US$45 adults and children) and park rangers share their knowledge of the reefs before letting visitors loose to experience their beauty first hand. Canoes and kayaks can be rented to explore alone (US$12–US$16 per hour).

Call in advance to book places on a tour and check that the marine conditions are suitable for boats to go out.

Time *1 hr–half a day.* ***Open*** *9am–5pm.* ***Adm*** *Free.* ***Amenities***

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park ★★★ ALL AGES

Hwy-1 at MM102.5, Key Largo (Oceanside), *305 451 1202,* ***www.pennekamppark.com****.*

John Pennekamp Coral Reef is an undersea state park reaching 3 miles into the Atlantic from dry land and stretching for around 25 miles along the coast. The park's visitor centre features displays, films and aquariums explaining the underwater environment, but the real reason to come here is to get out into the water for yourself. There are various ways to do this, catering for all age groups and abilities, including glass-bottom boat tours, which depart at 9:15am, 12:15pm and 3pm (US$24, US$17 under 12s) and each providing a window into the amazing aquatic world below. For a closer look, book a snorkelling

FUN FACT Perky's Bat Tower

Perky's Bat Tower – turn north after MM17 to reach it – was built in 1929 by businessman Ricter C. Perky. He hoped his tower would host a thriving bat population, which would eat all the area's mosquitoes, so he could build a resort. Perky's tower was an outstanding failure; the bats never came and the resort was never built.

The Best Beaches in the Florida Keys

The Florida Keys are surrounded by the third-largest coral reef in the world, which protects the islands from storms and hurricanes, but prevents the waves that make sand from reaching the shore. As such, there are few natural beaches in the Keys and these three are the best options for children.

Fort Zachary Taylor State Historic Site ★★ off Southard Street on Truman Annex is home to Key West's finest beach, where glorious but rocky sands are well used by local families. You can also explore an old fort or rent kayaks and snorkelling equipment.

Bahia Honda State Park ★★★ off Hwy-1 at MM37 contains some of Florida's most beautiful beaches, with the palm-lined, white coral sands of Calusa Beach at the western tip providing the best swimming. This popular state park also runs snorkelling tours and contains various amenities, including a gift shop and snack bar.

Sombrero Beach off Hwy-1 at MM50 is a small beach, which gently slopes into impossible blue waters halfway along the Florida Keys. It contains a children's playground, picnic tables and plenty of shade.

tour; these depart at 9am, noon and 3pm (US$30 adults, US$25 under 18s) and accept any age as long as the child can swim. Kayak and boat rentals, sailing tours and diving instruction are available; book in advance during peak periods. For glass-bottom boat and snorkelling tours *305 451 6300*, for diving tours *305 451 6322* and for boat rentals *305 451 6325*. Glass-bottom boat tours and snorkelling vessels are wheelchair accessible, consult the park for details of participation in snorkelling and scuba diving.

Many organisations in the Keys operate snorkelling and diving tours, some with stronger environmental credentials than others. This state park is committed to protecting the fragile underwater world it allows visitors to experience and is recommended for all those concerned about the protection of the Keys' delicate reefs.

Time *1 hr–all day.* ***Open*** *Park 8am until sunset, visitor centre 8am–5pm.* ***Adm*** *US$8 per car.* ***Amenities***

The Everglades National Park ★★★ ALL AGES

A designated World Heritage Site, The Everglades National Park is a vast subtropical wilderness and most visitors will achieve little more than dipping their toes into these timeless, yet acutely fragile and endangered, 'rivers of grass'. Before visiting the Everglades, assure your children that the closer they look, the more the beauty of this intricate protected landscape,

FUN FACT

African Queen

The African Queen boat that starred in the 1951 movie is moored in a marina next door to the Holiday Inn at MM100 near John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

teeming with wildlife large and small, will reveal itself.

INSIDER TIP

There are few places to buy petrol in the Everglades. Petrol stations are found in Everglades City and at the junction of Hwy-41/SR-29 on the west side, and Homestead and Florida City in the east.

The Everglades are so big that it takes first-time visitors some planning to tackle them and a lot depends on which side of the National Park you are. From the east, the park is entered via SR-9336 near Homestead; in the west it is entered in or around Everglades City. There are various places to stop along Hwy-41 (the Tamiami Trail, see p. 234), with Shark Valley being the most popular.

Via SR-9336

Most visitors enter the vast, eternally flat, subtropical wilderness of the Everglades from the east via SR-9336, which leads southwest from Homestead and where everything is set up for day visitors.

INSIDER TIP

There are very limited places to buy food and drink inside the National Park and many visitors bring their own supplies.

The Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center

305 242 7700 (open 8am–5pm daily) is 12 miles from Homestead on SR-9336 and an essential stop before heading into the National Park. The imaginative displays help children understand the environment they are about to encounter, and its

Kayaking in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park

When to Visit the Everglades

When planning a visit, be aware that the Everglades has two distinct seasons – wet and dry. Lasting from mid-December to April, the dry season is when the majority of visitors arrive – there are fewer insects and lower temperatures. The wet season, which runs from May until November, is very hot and humid and a significant rise in water levels causes the population of pesky biting insects to increase. This isn't a good time to bring children into the Everglades – the temperatures and insects will drive them mad and, with afternoon thunderstorms common, the number of ranger-led tours drops. For more information, check the Everglades National Park's website (***www.nps.gov/ever***).

threats, through reconstructions of its habitats, such as the ominous gator holes and a 15-minute film. Make sure youngsters pick up a Junior Rangers booklet (see p. 226) to make a visit more entertaining for them. At the same time, pick up a timetable of ranger talks, walks and boat tours in the park and plan your visit accordingly.

The official entrance to the National Park is south of the visitor centre (US$10 per car) and from here, SR-9336 leads southwest for 38 miles to Flamingo, passing several places where you can park and walk into the glades via a series of boardwalks and trails. Each leads deep into a different ecological zone and all have interpretive boards explaining the surrounding environments. Most of these trails are about half a mile long and easy for children to tackle. The minute you step away from the road, your senses are engulfed by the

The Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center

nature that surrounds you and the infinite beauty of this most subtle of natural wonders reveals itself.

INSIDER TIP
Never feed any wildlife you might encounter while in the Everglades.

There's little to see at Flamingo, at the end of SR-9336, which took a severe battering during the 2005 hurricane season. The main reason to drive this far is to join one of the organised boat tours, which depart from the marina at 10am, 1pm and 3:30pm every day except Tuesdays and Wednesdays (US$18, US$10 children aged 6–12, under 6s free). Leading deep into the waters that separate the Everglades from the Florida Keys, these tours are led by rangers who share their in-depth knowledge along the way.

Everglades City

On the west side of the Everglades, visitors head to Everglades City – a 45-minute drive from Naples and 3 miles south of Hwy-41 along SR-29 – for a base from which to explore this side of the park. The glades have a different personality here, as the coastline fragments into the lush Ten Thousand Islands and this once-prosperous town, which had the life ripped out of its infrastructure by Hurricane Donna in the 1960s, is now the haunt of fishermen and hunters.

If you're tackling the Everglades from the west, there's no formal entrance into the park and it can be confusing to know where to begin. Many visitors start at the **Gulf Coast Visitor Center** AGE 5 & UP (*239 695 2591*) half a mile south of Everglades City on SR-29 (open 9am–4:30pm daily) and hop aboard one of their National Park Boat

Robert is Here

SW 344th Street, Homestead (*305 246 1592. www.robertishere.com*). It's impossible to miss Robert is Here, a massive fruit store on the side of the road leading to the Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center (see p. 231). Specialising in the rare and exotic, the store's shelves are crammed with sugar apples, key limes, passion fruit and papaya, and many visitors call in on their way to the National Park to stock up on fruit and fluids to combat the heat and humidity of the glades. Established in 1959, the store is named after the founder's son who, at the age of 6, was sent to stand on the edge of the road to sell his father's cucumbers. After failing to sell any on the first day, Robert's father made a large sign proclaiming 'Robert is Here'. The next day all the cucumbers were sold and a fruit store was born. Open 8am to 7pm daily. Closed September to October.

Airboat Rides

As Hwy-41 approaches Miami, airboat tour operators compete furiously for tourists' attention and cash, and although these distinctive boats are synonymous with the Everglades, there are a number of factors to consider before taking one. Firstly they are very noisy, which could scare some young children. Some operators are more environmentally concerned than others and those that are not can cause damage through pollution, scarring the landscape and feeding the animals. If you are concerned about which operator to use, seek advice from one of the visitor centres.

Tours, which depart every half hour from mid-December to mid-April (US$27, US$14 children aged 5–12). These tours venture deep into the startling array of offshore waterways and a maze of mangrove islands, where you're likely to spy manatees, herons, alligators and even the odd dolphin.

INSIDER TIP

Hamilton Observation Tower stands behind the Everglades City Chamber of Commerce on SR-29, south of Everglades City, and provides glorious views of the National Park and nearby Ten Thousand Islands (open office hours, US$2 per person).

The **Havana Café** (open 7am–3pm Tues–Sat) is an excellent place to stop for breakfast before heading into the glades – it also serves fabulous Cuban sandwiches for lunch. The café is situated in the Chokoloskee Mall on SR-29, south of Everglades City. Consisting of only a post office and the café, this has to be the world's smallest shopping mall.

If you prefer to picnic, head to the Small Wood Store, an old Indian Trading Post built in 1906 (*941 695 2989*) on the waterfront in Chokoloskee (open 10am–5pm daily 1st Dec–1st May and 11am–4pm Fri–Tues 2nd May–30th Nov) where you'll find picnic tables and magnificent views of the Ten Thousand Islands.

Driving Hwy-41

Also known as the Tamiami Trail, Hwy-41 runs from Naples in the west through Big Cypress Preserve and across the top of the Everglades National Park to Miami in the east. There are several places to stop and experience the Everglades along this road and it's important if you're travelling with children that you do stop, otherwise life will be very boring for them.

Situated 50 miles east of Miami, the **Oasis Visitor Center** (*239 695 1201,* open 8:30am–4:30pm daily) has a good bookshop and a small boardwalk where you're guaranteed to encounter plenty of gators. Half a mile east, the gallery of award-winning landscape photographer

Clyde Butcher (*239 695 2428, www.clydebutcher.com*) features his breathtaking black and white images of the Everglades and Big Cypress Preserve and is an essential stop.

The closer to Miami Hwy-41 gets, the more tacky tourist attractions start to line the route. Head for the **Shark Valley Visitor Center** (*305 221 8776,* open 9:15am–5:15pm, US$10 per car) to get into the park. At this point a 15-mile trail with an observation tower at the end loops into the park and back again, which visitors can either walk, cycle (bike hire US$7 per hour) or join a 2-hour tram tour to explore. The narrated tram tours (*www.sharkvalleytramtours.com*) depart every hour on the hour from 9am–5pm (US$18, US$17 children aged 3–12) and reservations are recommended between December and March.

For Active Families

Everglades Hostel

20 SW 2nd Avenue, Florida City, 305 248 1122, www.evergladeshostel.com.

On the east side of the National Park in Florida City, the Everglades Hostel rents canoes (US$30 per day) and bicycles (US$15 per day) along with bike racks for cars (US$6 per day) and will drop off and pick up cyclists from the park's entrance if required. This organisation runs a series of full and half-day canoeing tours from November to March, which include transportation, park entrance fee and food. Tour rates US$80–US$100.

Everglades Rentals & Eco Adventures AGE 10 & UP

Ivey House Bed and Breakfast, Camellia Street, Everglades City, 941 695 4666, www.everglades adventures.com.

Based on the west side of the Everglades, Everglades Rentals and Eco Adventures organise naturalist-led kayak tours into the Everglades backcountry from 1st November to mid-April. They also rent canoes and kayaks to those who prefer to explore alone. Children have to be aged 10 or older to join in and 10 to 12-year-olds must share a parent's boat.

***Time** 1 hr–all day. **Rates** US$99–US$124, visitors staying at Ivey House receive a 20% discount. **Credit** MC, V.*

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

Key West

MODERATE/EXPENSIVE

Conch Republic Seafood Company

631 Greene Street, Key West, 305 294 4403, www.conchrepublic seafood.com.

Housed in a large open-sided building on the edge of the marina, this popular seafood restaurant is infused with Key West's chilled-out ambience and blessed with one of the best views of any restaurant in the

city. All kinds of people dine here, including boaters, tourists and locals, and the friendly atmosphere is accommodating for all ages. On the menu, specialty starters include baked oysters and cracked conch and mains are a mix of sandwiches, salads, pasta and seafood. If children get tired of watching life on the marina outside, there's a number of inside TV screens to keep them entertained.

Open *For lunch and dinner daily, plus a late-night menu after 10pm.* ***Main Courses*** *US$7–US$10 lunch, US$17–US$35 dinner.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

MODERATE

Mangia Mangia ★★

900 Southard Street, Key West, 305 294 2469, www.mangia-mangia.com.

Decorated with wooden panelling and colourful artwork, there's a warmth and vibrancy to this seafood and pasta restaurant housed in an old wooden Key West building. Mangia Mangia is perfect for evening family dining because it's located away from the main drag of Duval Street and, although full of life itself, the restaurant is surrounded by a peaceful neighbourhood and local life. Fresh homemade pastas are the stars of the imaginative menu and are served with style in many different ways and to suit many different tastes, all accompanied by a superb wine list. It's hard to beat dining on the outside patio on a warm Key West night.

Open *5:30am–10pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *US$15–US$35.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Easily identified by its large mural of underwater sealife, the Waterfront Market, located at the marina on William Street, is a superb deli supermarket and takeaway. A recommended place for self-caterers to shop, the market also sells a good range of takeout sandwiches, salads and sushi, and includes an upstairs juice bar and Internet café. Open 8am to 6pm daily and Fridays until 9pm.

INEXPENSIVE/MODERATE

Camille's Restaurant

1202 Simonton Street, Key West, 305 296 4811, www.camilleskeywest.com.

A block away from the bustle of Duval Street, the very pink Camille's exudes old-fashioned charm. It's inexpensive lunch and dinner menus attract locals and visitors alike throughout the day, but it's the breakfasts that really shine. Tuck into yellow corn cashew waffles slathered with fresh mango and coconut milk sauce or eggs cooked whatever way you like. Children are offered colouring books and crayons to keep them entertained and a children's menu to pick from.

Open *8am–3pm & 6–10pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *Breakfast US$3–US$14, lunch US$4–US$13, dinner US$17–US$26.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

The Rest of the Keys

MODERATE/ EXPENSIVE

Morada Bay ★★★

Hwy-1 at MM81.6 (Bayside), Islamorada, 305 664 0604, www.moradabay-restaurant.com.

If you only ever eat out at one restaurant in the Keys with your children, make it this one. Too often in restaurants that focus on families, the food goes down a notch. However, the cuisine at this beachside bistro is full of Caribbean and Mediterranean influences and utterly fabulous. The genius of this restaurant, however, is its location. Spreading out over a small, child-friendly beach, children are free to play in the sand while adults relax and enjoy the food, company and breathtaking sunsets. If you've arranged a babysitter, don't miss a night out at the adjacent sister restaurant **Pierre's** (*305 664 3225, www.pierres-restaurant.com*), a more formal option reminiscent of the Ivory Coast, where fine dining starts with cocktails on the veranda and ends with speciality coffee overlooking the torch-lit beach.

Open** 11:30am–10pm Sun–Thurs and until 11pm Fri & Sat. Bar open until 11:30pm. **Main Courses** Lunch US$10–US$22, dinner US$13–US$33. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

Oyster House Restaurant

Chokoloskee Causeway (Hwy-29 south), Everglades City, 239 695 2073, www.oysterhouserestaurant.com.

Nestled on the edge of the National Park and adjacent to a marina, the Oyster House is a friendly restaurant, popular with fishermen, and forms part of a wider complex containing holiday cabins and nature trails. The rustic interior is decorated with hunting trophies and a screened porch, and wooden seating booths provide beautiful views of the surrounding glades. The menu contains mostly seafood, fresh from local suppliers, and also the chance to sample local alligator meat.

Open** 11am–9pm daily and until 10pm Fri & Sat. **Main Courses** US$10–US$23. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

Key Largo Coffee House

★★ **FIND**

Hwy-1 at MM100.2 (Oceanside), Key Largo, 305 453 4844, www.keylargocoffeehouse.com.

Key Largo Coffee House is the place to head if you're missing a proper cup of tea. It serves a good range of English teas along with delicious smoothies (including bubblegum flavour) and speciality coffees. The food is also fabulous; breakfast dishes range from raisin pecan French toast to spicy Cajun omelette, and lunch includes an array of seafood, paninis, wraps and tacos. Look out for one of this restaurant's special events, such as their Stone Crab and Seafood Festival or Pirates Fest. Diners eat on a shady wooden porch overlooking a courtyard where

Key West seafood platter

the resident Labrador – known as The Chief – keeps an eye on events, or inside the rustic old Colonial-style house.

Open *7am–10pm daily* ***Main Courses*** *Breakfast US$7–US$14, lunch US$7–US$13, dinner US$12–US$29.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INEXPENSIVE/MODERATE

Key's Fisheries ★

End of 35th Street, Marathon at MM49 (Bayside), *305 743 4353,* ***www.keysfisheries.com****.*

This unpretentious, inexpensive family-friendly waterfront restaurant situated halfway along the Keys is a laid-back place to stop for lunch or dinner. Diners order at a window and sit at picnic-style tables facing the water – a perfect spot to watch marina life and superb sunsets. The mainly seafood menu is fresh and hearty value for money and an added extra is the chance to feed the nearby fish and birds. Takeaway is also available.

Open *11am–9pm.* ***Main Courses*** *US$4–US$19.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

There are limited supermarket options in Everglades City. If you're self-catering or picnicking, stock up before leaving Naples.

INEXPENSIVE

Mrs Mac's Kitchen ★

Hwy-1 at MM99.4 (Bayside), *305 451 3722.*

This very popular with the locals 1950s-style diner serves inexpensive seafood, steaks, burgers and sandwiches, and is the kind of place that once you've discovered you'll bring your children back to again and again. Diners eat in small booths or on stools at the counter and the decor, crammed with old-fashioned license plates and folk art, is a magnet for children's attention. The breakfast, lunch and dinner menus are large and food

The Everglades

Dining options are limited in the Everglades. At Florida City, a number of chain and very average seafood restaurants, including the **Mutineer** (*305 245 3377, www.mutineer.biz*) line Hwy-1. Tucked away on N Krome Avenue, one block west of Hwy-1, is the **Farmer's Market Restaurant** (*305 242 0008,* open 5:30am–9pm). Don't be put off by appearances, this basic restaurant located inside the Farmers' Cooperative is clean and family run, and set up to cater for the region's agricultural workers. The food is good, inexpensive and fresh, and their hearty breakfasts are an excellent way to start a day in the Everglades.

In Everglades City, restaurants tend to serve early to accommodate early-rising fishermen. The **Seafood Depot** (102 Collier Avenue, *239 695 0075, www.evergladesseafooddepot.com*, open 7am–9pm) serves basic seafood, pastas and steaks alongside the not-so-basic Everglades frog legs and gator tails; there's also a pizzeria takeaway (*239 695 3665,* open 4–9pm) located behind the supermarket.

Along Hwy-41 the only restaurant is at the **Miccosukkee Indian Village** (*305 223 8380*) west of Shark Valley.

delicious, just make sure you leave room for dessert, when you'll be hard pushed to decide between peanut butter pie and Hawaiian wedding cake. Each night a different all-you-can-eat offer is added to the menu.

Open *7am–9:30pm Mon–Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *Breakfast US$5–US$9, lunch US$4–US$13, dinner US$4–US$25.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

The Islamorada Restaurant & Bakery, also known as **Bob's Bunz** (*www.bobsbunz.com*), is the place to tuck into freshly baked muffins, pastries and pies, along with their famous cinnamon 'bunz'. MM81.6 (Bayside). Open 6am to 2pm daily.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

VERY EXPENSIVE

The Moorings Village ★★★

123 Beach Road, near MM81.5 (Oceanside), Islamorada, 305 664 4708, www.mooringsvilllage.com.

Moorings Village is a small collection of luxurious, yet rustic, cottages of varying sizes set in 35 acres of tropically landscaped grounds and the kind of place where families from Key West come to get away from it all. Although close to a number of attractions and right across the road from its restaurants Pierre's and Morada Bay (see p. 237), Moorings might as well be on its own island, making it perfect for

Key West

A cluster of chain motels and resorts is located on the outskirts of Key West as Hwy-1 reaches the island, including a **Holiday Inn** (3850 N Roosevelt Boulevard, *1 305 294 6681, www.holidayinnkeys.com*, rooms US$140–US$180) or **Travelodge** GREEN (3444 N Roosevelt Boulevard, *305 296 7593, www.travelodgekeywest.com*, rooms from US$110).

A large number of the small accommodation options in Key West's old town do not take children, but one small family-run option that does is the **Wicker Guesthouse** GREEN (913 Duval Street, *305 296 4275, www.wickerguesthouse.com*, rooms US$109–US$399) or for a more luxurious hotel try the **Crown Plaza Hotel** (430 Duval Street, *305 296 2991, www.holidayinnkeys.com*, rooms US$210–US$360) which overlooks Key West's waterfront. For self-catering, check **Travelers Palm** (*305 294 9560, www.travelerspalm.com*, US$168–US$478 per night), who rent a small number of cottages and apartments in Key West.

families who want space to relax together yet also want to be within driving distance of all the Keys' attractions. A bonus for children is the resort's large beach, one of the few on the Keys, and off the sand, older children can enjoy tennis, kayaking and windsurfing.

Rooms *18 cottages.* ***Rates*** *Weekly rentals for a small cottage US$3,850–US$5,775, large cottage US$6,650–US$10,500. Some small cottages available for a minimum of 2 nights' stay from US$395–US$750 per night.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

INSIDER TIP

Book accommodation ahead of time before travelling to either the Keys or the Everglades in high season – January to April – when there is a high demand and limited options.

EXPENSIVE/VERY EXPENSIVE

Casa Marina ★★ GREEN

1500 Reynolds Street, Key West, 888 303 5717, www.casamarinaresort.com.

This grand old lady of Key West resorts sits on the edge of a private beach and is the most elegant place to stay in town. Opened in 1920, Casa Marina is listed on America's National Register for Historic Places and has accommodated a plethora of rich and famous guests over the decades. A recent renovation brought the resort bang up to date in modern luxury and the redesigned rooms ooze style and comfort. The onsite facilities are first class, especially the private beach where hammocks and oceanside pools await. A range of

children's activities is in place, but these require parental accompaniment. Downtown Key West is only a short walk away.

Rooms *311.* ***Rates*** *US$179–US$700.* ***Credit*** *DC, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

Cheeca Lodge & Spa ★★

Hwy-1 MM82 (Oceanside), Islamorada, *305 664 4651,* ***www.cheeca.com****.*

Cheeca Lodge & Spa is one of the Keys' veteran luxury resorts, where the likes of George Bush have been known to spend the odd night. Despite its rates, this is a chilled-out, friendly place, which welcomes all age groups and one of the most popular resorts in the Keys for families because of its excellent children's club, Camp Cheeca. This club, aimed at 5 to 12-year-olds, organises activities such as fishing, lagoon swimming, games and crafts, and children's nights out. The onsite dining options have special children's menus or there's a babysitting service for parents wanting a romantic night out alone at its beautiful Atlantic Edge restaurant.

Rooms *199.* ***Rates*** *US$249–US$878.* ***Credit*** *AE, DC, DISC MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

EXPENSIVE

Island City House Hotel ★★★

411 William Street, Key West, *305 294 5702,* ***www.islandcityhouse.com****.*

Island City House is one of the few hotels in converted historic properties in Key West that accepts children, and is one of my favourite places to stay in the whole of Florida. This beautiful hotel consists of three rambling wooden houses, which share tropically landscaped grounds and a shady swimming pool. Well suited for families because of its proximity to the hustle and bustle of Duval Street and many of Key West's attractions, Island City House is also an oasis of calm that feels as though it's a million miles

The Rest of the Keys

On arrival at Key Largo, visitors are greeted with numerous accommodation options including a **Holiday Inn** GREEN at MM100 (*305 451 5592,* ***www.holidayinnkeylargo.com***, rooms US$125–US$200), a resort-style hotel, the **Marriott Key Largo** GREEN at MM104 (*305 453 0000,* ***www.marriottkeylargo.com***, rooms US$160–US$425) and **The Pelican** at MM99.4 (*305 451 3576* ***www.hungrypelican.com***, rooms US$85–US$220), a small collection of self-catering cottages and rooms tucked away by a private waterfront.

Further down the Keys near Islamorada at MM80 is a **Hampton Inn and Suites** (*305 664 0073,* ***www.keys-resort.com***, rooms US$190–US$270).

The Everglades

On the west side of the Everglades, accommodation options are limited to Everglades City and it's important to book in advance in high season (Jan–Apr). A basic option, with a lovely pool overlooking the glades, is the **Captain's Table** (102 East Broadway, *239 695 4211, www.captainstablehotel.com*, rooms US$65–US$170) while the **Ivey House** GREEN (107 Camellia Street, *239 695 3299, www.iveyhouse.com*, rooms US$85–US$205) runs a friendly B&B and rents a basic small two-bedroomed cottage (US$116–US$247 per night, minimum 2 nights' stay) and offers guests discounts on its canoe and kayak rentals and eco adventure tours (see p. 235).

On the east side of the Everglades, the only accommodation option for families is the collection of motels on Hwy-1 at Florida City. Recommended are the **Holiday Inn Express** (*305 247 3414, www.holidayinn.co.uk*, rooms from US$113) and the budget **Fairway Inn** (*305 248 4202,* rooms from US$40).

away from the intensity of downtown. A host of friendly cats laze around the hotel's gardens, where breakfast is served each morning, and staff can organise trips and activities for guests or bike rentals for US$12 per day.

***Rooms** 24. **Rates** US$200–US$420. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** P @ In room A/C*

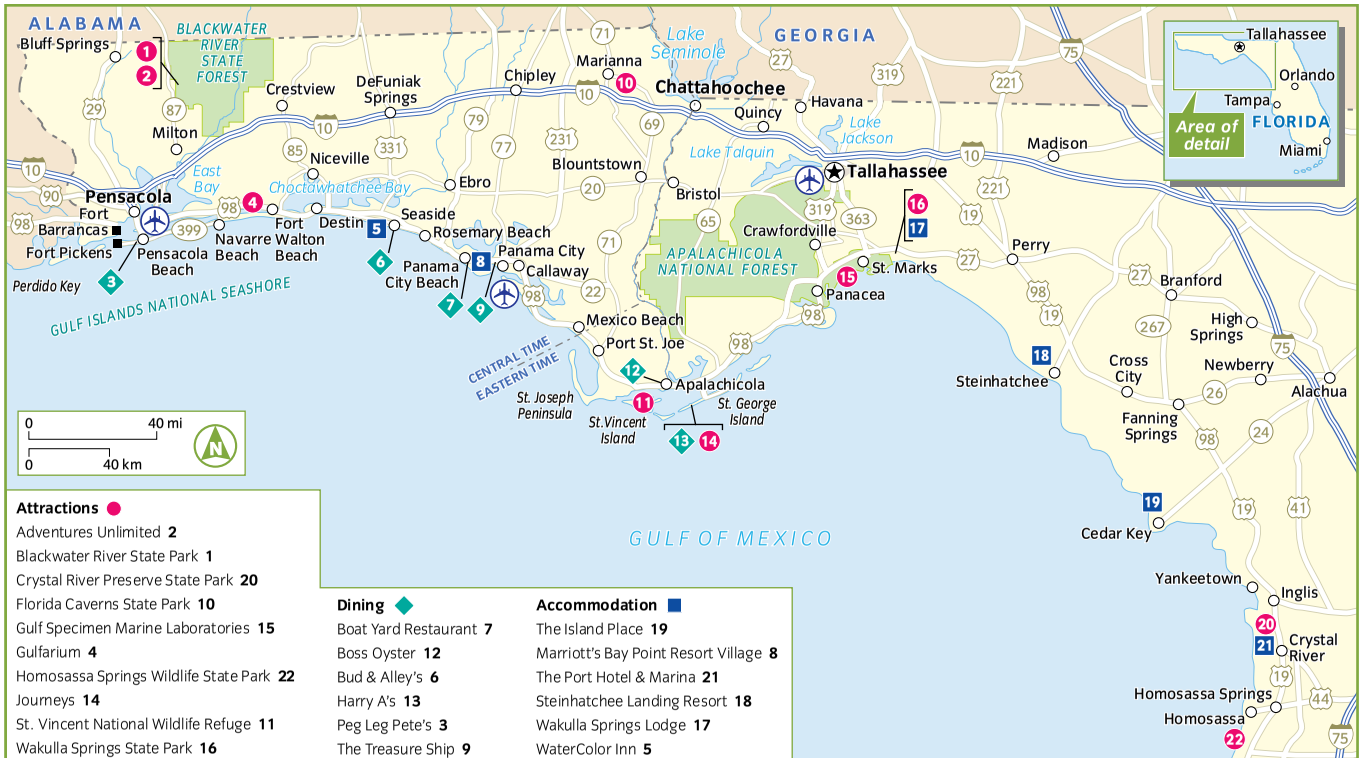
Swamp Cottage ★★

Off Hwy-41 at the Clyde Butcher Gallery near Everglades City, 239 695 2428, www.vrbo.com/263558.

Self-catering doesn't come any more remote than this tranquil cottage nestled deep in the heart of Big Cypress National Preserve. This former home of photographer Clyde Butcher is surrounded by endless subtropical acres of lush wilderness and tucked away behind his gallery on Hwy-41 (see p. 234). The cottage is spacious and well equipped and sleeps up to eight, but the best feature is an enclosed sun porch – perfect for viewing local wildlife. Despite its remote location, Miami to the east and Naples to the west are both around an hour's drive away, while within the park itself there are plenty of outdoor activities to enjoy.

Rooms** 2 bedrooms. **Rates** US$275–US$350 per night depending on the length of stay. **Credit** AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities

9 The Panhandle & Big Bend



Attractions
Adventures Unlimited **2**
Blackwater River State Park **1**
Crystal River Preserve State Park **20**
Florida Caverns State Park **10**
Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories **15**
Gulfarium **4**
Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park **22**
Journeys **14**
St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge **11**
Wakulla Springs State Park **16**

Dining
Boat Yard Restaurant **7**
Boss Oyster **12**
Bud & Alley's **6**
Harry A's **13**
Peg Leg Pete's **3**
The Treasure Ship **9**

Accommodation
The Island Place **19**
Marriott's Bay Point Resort Village **8**
The Port Hotel & Marina **21**
Steinhatchee Landing Resort **18**
Wakulla Springs Lodge **17**
WaterColor Inn **5**

A firm holiday favourite with American families, the northwest region of Florida is as far from the foreign tourist track as European families can get. However, the ever-increasing number of British travelling this far are discovering just how much this region has to offer. Curving gently north from Tampa, the Big Bend, made up of 150 miles of coastal wetlands, is a place to mess around on the water and watch lazy sunsets drop into wide horizons. While nestling beneath Georgia and Alabama, the Florida Panhandle has more in common with its Deep South neighbours than the rest of Florida. Both regions are popular destinations for active families as they offer some of the best kayaking in America and fantastic swimming in the aquamarine seas that lap the Panhandle's pristine yet wild beaches. However, at the time of writing, this stunning coastline is filled with clean up crews working to remove all traces of oil and tar balls on the sands in the wake of BP's massive oil spill into Gulf waters.

With more than its share of old towns, there are plenty of opportunities for history loving families to delve into Florida's past – from the relics of Native American Indians to the site of a controversial presidential election. As well as museums, there are water parks and gulfariums to entertain all age groups. Ultimately however, Florida's northwest is the place families come to relax and enjoy a way of life as slow as the old rivers that this region is famous for.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Information Centres

The region's main tourist office is the FlaUSA Visitor Information Center (*www.visitflorida.com*) located on the ground floor of the New Capitol Building in Tallahassee (see p. 248). Open 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday.

Orientation

Use Hwy-19 to explore the Big Bend's coastal communities and Hwy-98 along the Panhandle, although some smaller roads such as SR-30A break off from Hwy-98 to hug the coast. Arching across the top of the Panhandle, I-10 is the fastest way to travel between Tallahassee and Pensacola and the only way to reach Florida's most northerly state parks.

Arriving

By Plane Tallahassee Regional Airport (*850 891 7801, www.talgov.com/airport*) is 7 miles southwest of the city and receives internal flights from Miami, Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Tampa. KLM, Continental, Delta, British Airways and Virgin Atlantic provide services from London airports, Manchester and Edinburgh with stops in either Washington, Atlanta, Miami or Orlando.

Pensacola Regional Airport (*850 436 5000, www.flypensacola.com*) is a 15-mile drive from downtown Pensacola and receives internal flights from Orlando, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale. Panama City County Airport (*850 763 6751, www.pcairport.com*) is a small facility 4 miles north of the city, serving a few cities in the south, including Orlando. At the time of writing, this airport is being relocated and developed and will emerge as the new Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport. This new airport is located on Hwy-388 to the northeast of Panama City approximately 8 miles east of the junction with SR-77. For further information, see *www.newpcairport.com*.

By Car From the south, you can drive Hwy-19 along the Big Bend's coast from St. Petersburg, or the faster I-75 further inland and reached from Orlando via the Florida Turnpike. From the east, I-10 leads across the state from Jacksonville to Tallahassee and on to Pensacola, while Hwy-98 travels along the Panhandle's Gulf Coast.

Getting Around

With limited public transport options, the only feasible way to travel around the Big Bend and Panhandle with children is by car. For details of car hire, see p. 31.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Children's Top Five Attractions

1. **Kayaking** in Blackwater River State Park; p. 262.
2. **Getting** up close to the resident manatees at Homasassa Springs State Wildlife Park; p. 263.
3. **Swimming** the emerald-green waters at Wakulla Springs; p. 261.
4. **Strolling** through Tallahassee's historic downtown; p. 247.
5. **Undertaking** a night-time critter hunt with Journeys on St. George Island; p. 258.

Child-Friendly Events & Entertainment

Fiesta of Five Flags

Pensacola, 850 433 6512, www.fiestaoffiveflags.org.

This annual festival is one of the longest running and largest in Florida and celebrates the founding of Pensacola by the Spanish in 1559. The festival takes place over a number of days around May and June and includes parades, a Spanish fiesta and all kinds of activities for children, including treasure hunts and a boat parade.

Florida Seafood Festival

Apalachicola, 888 653 8011, www.floridaseafoodfestival.com.

Located in Apalachicola's Battery Park, this 2-day festival in

November is the oldest seafood festival in Florida. Starting with the Blessing of the Fleet, the festival includes a parade, a race through town, arts and crafts stalls and live music. It's the oyster-eating contest held on the Saturday afternoon of the festival that locals flock to see. Contestants have 15 minutes to eat as many oysters as they can without being sick. Get there early for a front-row seat!

Halloween Howl

Tallahassee Museum of History & Natural Science, 3945 Museum Drive, 850 575 8684, www.tallahasseemuseum.org.

Advertised as a 'howling good time', ghosts, goblins and things that go bump in the night are out in force in the museum grounds during this annual two-evening event around Halloween. There are haunted trails for children to explore, including a not so scary one for younger children, and a programme of trick or treating, storytelling, live music and magic shows – all of which are great for pre-teens – and even adults!

Adm *US$10 adults, US$8 children.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.*

Historic Towns & Cities

Tallahassee

Visitor Information Center: 106 Jefferson Street, Tallahassee, 850 606 2305, www.visittallahassee.com.

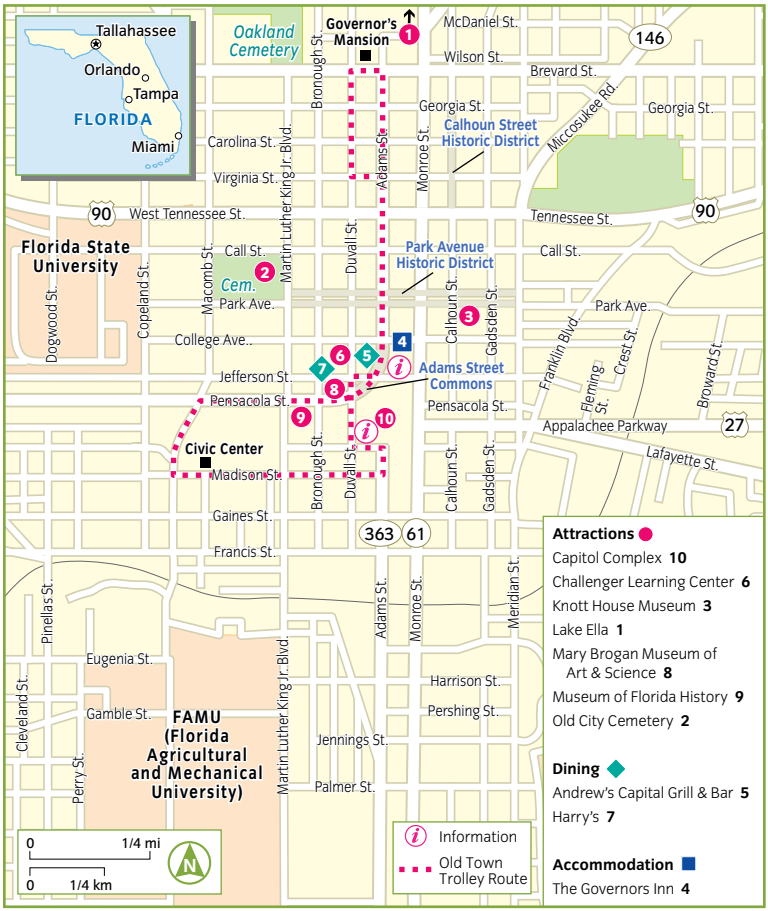
Chosen as state capital in 1824 due to its position halfway between St. Augustine and Pensacola, Tallahassee today seems more than geographically distant from the more dominant cities in the south.

The Old Capitol Building, Tallahassee

The name 'Tallahassee' is derived from the Muskogeon Indian for 'old town' and true to its name, the city is as focused on its history as it is on managing the modern state it governs. It's this distinctive mix of old and new that makes Tallahassee a fascinating place to explore; an excellent free walking guide can be picked up from the visitor information centre (see above).

At the heart of the city, and on one of its highest spots – Tallahassee is surprisingly hilly for Florida – stands the Capitol Complex, which embodies the city's characteristic marrying of old and new. Built in Greek Revival style, the **Old Capitol Building** AGE 10 & UP (*850 487 1902,* 9am–4:30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4:30pm Sat, noon–4:30pm Sun, free, time

TALLAHASSEE



30 minutes) contains exhibits featuring artefacts and reproductions detailing Florida's political history and that of the building itself.

Construction on the **New Capitol Building** AGE 10 & UP (*850 488 6167,* 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, free, time 30 minutes) began in the 1960s after the failure to move the Capitol to Orlando to be closer to the boom cities of Tampa and Miami. Completed in 1977, the building houses Florida's executive and legislative offices and towers above the whole city. The observation floor on the 22nd storey provides visitors with panoramic views of the city and beyond.

Fanning out from the Capitol Complex is Tallahassee's historical and cultural district. Here the streets, known as 'canopied roads' are shaded by rambling oak trees laden with Spanish

Tallahassee's Museums & Attractions

Of Tallahassee's numerous museums and attractions, these are the most interesting for children.

Mary Brogan Museum of Art & Science ★ AGE 3 & UP on Duval Street (*850 513 0700, www.thebrogan.org*) makes learning fun. Its two floors feature interactive science displays, a programme of changing art exhibitions and touring shows, complemented by education-based activities. (10am–5pm Mon–Sat, 1–5pm Sun. US$10 adults, US$5 children aged 3–17, under 3s free, time 30 minutes).

The **Challenger Learning Center** ★ AGE 5 & UP (*850 645 7796, www.challengertlh.com*) opposite the Mary Brogan Museum, is an aerospace-based attraction containing an IMAX cinema and planetarium (call the above number for show times. IMAX US$8 adults, US$6 children, planetarium US$5 adults, US$4 children).

The **Tallahassee Museum of History & Natural Science** ★★ AGE 4 & UP (*850 576 1636, www.tallahasseemuseum.org*) is located southeast of downtown, near the airport on Museum Drive and consists of 52 acres of historic buildings and nature trails. Exhibits include historical recreations, art galleries and a science-based Discovery Center. Use booklets and interpretive boards to discover the history and environment of the Big Bend, or join an educational tour (9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 12:30–5pm Sun. US$8, US$5.50 children aged 4–15, under 4s free, time 2½ hours).

moss, which arch across the roads and buzz with politicos and lawyers on weekdays.

Directly behind the New Capitol Building is the Supreme Court, scene of the infamous battles that decided the 2000 presidential elections when Bush was finally elected in Florida by a margin of 537 votes and the phrase 'hanging chad' made its introduction into political vocabulary.

Kleman Plaza is north of the Supreme Court on Duval Street and is filled with benches and fountains. It is a central place to park, enjoy a packed lunch or grab lunch at **Harry's** (*850 222 3976, www.hookedonharrys.com*), a New Orleans-style restaurant serving wraps, burgers, soups and seafood from around US$9.

A number of museums and attractions are clustered in this area (see box, p. 249) including the old-fashioned **Museum of Florida History** OVERRATED AGE 5 & UP (*850 245 6400, www.museumoffloridahistory.com*, 9am–4:30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4:30pm Sat, noon–4:30pm Sun, free, time 1 hour) on Bronough Street, which displays the history of Florida from dinosaurs to the present day.

Tallahassee's Black History

Around 70 plantations once occupied approximately 300,000 acres of land between Tallahassee and Thomasville, 28 miles to the north in Georgia. Mostly growing cotton, these plantations and the slave trade that supported them are an integral part of the region's history. To explore further, head for the **Black Archives Research Center** AGE 12 & UP (*850 599 8564, www.famu.edu*, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, free) at Florida State University, and **Knott House Museum** AGE 12 & UP (*850 922 2459, www.museumoffloridahistory.com/sites/knott-house*, guided tours 1pm, 2pm and 3pm Wed–Fri, and on the hour from 10am–3pm Sat, free, time 45 minutes) on Park Avenue, a lovingly restored Victorian house thought to have been built by George Proctor, a free black who became Florida's first African American physician. However, the most poignant memorial of segregation is the Old City Cemetery on Park Avenue, where blacks are buried in the western half, and whites the eastern.

On Park Avenue, leading east from the **Old City Cemetery,** you'll find a chain of attractive parks that host a vibrant Saturday market from 8am to 2pm March to November. Stalls sell local arts and crafts and regional produce alongside a range of activities for children, including storytelling and live music. For a break from downtown, **Lake Ella** is north of the centre on Monroe Street (Hwy-27), and a pleasant recreational area around a scenic lake with a string of wooden cottages housing quirky shops. Four miles northeast of downtown on Thomasville Road is the **Maclay State Gardens** ★ ALL AGES (*850 487 4114, www.floridastateparks.org/maclaygardens*, daily 8am–sunset. US$5 per car), a large ornamental garden where families can swim, picnic and explore nature trails. Peak bloom season at the park is January to April, the onsite Maclay House museum also opens during these months to coincide with this annual spectacular natural display.

Pensacola

Visitor Information Center, 401 East Gregory Street, Pensacola, 850 434 1234, www.visitpensacola.com.

Five miles inland of its beautiful beach, Pensacola is the second-oldest city in Florida and one lucky to exist at all after an ill-fated settlement established here by the Spanish in 1599 was destroyed by a hurricane 2 years later. Pensacola's nickname – the City of the Five Flags – symbolises the historic power struggles that have caused ownership to change hands many times over the centuries.

History is Pensacola's main draw, but delving into it is more

PENSACOLA

of an adult-orientated pursuit, as the city's historical museums contain little to engage young children.

That said, Pensacola's charming streets are lined with colonial French-style balconies and filled with offbeat shops, laid-back cafés and piped Dixieland jazz – they are a pleasure to explore and reminiscent of New Orleans, a 3-hour drive away.

INSIDER TIP

Downtown Pensacola is quiet at weekends and all the museums are closed on Sundays.

There are three distinct historic areas to explore: North Hill west of Hwy-29 as it leads south into downtown with its elaborate late 19th-century houses. The Palafox District, a commercial centre with a number of

Downtown Pensacola

striking early 20th-century buildings including the **Saenger Theater** (*850 434 7444, www.pensacolasaenger.com*), a Spanish Baroque theatre. More interesting is the Seville District and **Pensacola's Historic Village** AGE 4 & UP (*850 595 5985, www.historicpensacola.org*), an appealing cluster of old properties around Zaragoza and Tarragona Streets, a number of which are open to the public. Tickets can be bought from the **Tivoli High House Gift Shop** (*850 595 5993,* 10am–4pm Tues–Sat, US$6 adults, US$3 children, time 1 hour) on Zaragoza Street.

INSIDER TIP

The car park at the junction of Zaragoza and Tarragona Streets is the best place to park when exploring the Seville District and Historic Village. It contains a small archaeological dig of a commanding officer's compound from the 1800s, where it is believed that Civil War General and President Andrew Jackson came to sign agreements that ceded Florida to the United States.

The city's two main museums are the **Pensacola Historical Museum** AGE 5 & UP (*850 433 1559, www.pensacolahistory.org,* 10am–4pm Tues–Sat. US$4, time 30 minutes) on East Zaragoza Street and the **T. T. Wentworth Jr Museum** AGE 4 & UP (*850 595 5990,* 10am–4pm Tues–Sat, free, time 1 hour) on Jefferson Street. T. T. Wentworth is the more interesting and child friendly. An unusual lunch stop is the **Museum of Art** (*850 432 62 47, www.pensacolamuseumofart.org*), housed in an old jailhouse and containing a small restaurant serving fresh sandwiches and salads, all accompanied by light jazz. A number of cafés and restaurants cluster around the junction of Government and Alcaniz Streets

and children can look out for the colourful ornamental pelicans dotted around the area.

Southwest of downtown Pensacola, just off the Gulf Breeze Parkway, is the **National Museum of Naval Aviation** ★★ AGE 5 & UP (*850 453 2389, www.navalaviationmuseum.org*, 9am–5pm daily, free, time 30 minutes). Worth a visit with older children, this collection of historic naval, marine and coastguard aircraft spans the history of flight from 1911 to the exploration of space. The museum contains more than 150 aircraft, 100 scale models and aviation memorabilia and the simulated test flight is a big hit with children.

Cedar Key ★

www.cedarkey.org.

Situated on an island 3 miles from the mainland and halfway between Tampa and Tallahassee, Cedar Key is one of the oldest communities in Florida.

Today this town of ramshackle streets and weathered old wooden houses promotes itself as a place where time stands still, and its slow pace of life will not appeal to every family. However, for those wanting to get off the beaten track and discover a small pocket of Florida history, it's worth breaking your journey here or spending some time discovering the region's natural beauty.

Cedar Key's atmospheric downtown is home to a number of one-off gift shops and art galleries and is easily explored on foot. A booklet detailing a historic walking tour can be bought for US$4.50 from the **Historical Society Museum** AGE 7 & UP (*352 543 5549, www.cedarkeymuseum.org*, 1–4pm Sun–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat. US$1 adults, 50¢ children, time 15 minutes) on the corner of SR-24 and 2nd Street. You can also explore by bike, as the speed limit drops to 15 mph in places, making cycling safe and stress free. Bikes can be rented from the grocery store on the corner of SR-24 and 3rd Street for US$5 per hour or US$15 for a whole day.

Cedar Key's waterfront, with its small beach and play area, is one of the most photogenic in Florida and the best place in town to find somewhere to eat. Try **Frogs Landing** (*352 543 9243, www.frogslanding.net*) for a selection of seafood dishes from US$13 and sandwiches from US$8, all of which can be munched on an outdoor, sea-facing balcony, a perfect spot from which to look out for dolphins. Most accommodation is located along the short waterfront. You won't find any chain motels, just a series of small, locally run establishments with rates starting at US$70 per night.

INSIDER TIP

Cedar Key gets very busy at weekends so if you plan to stay here on Friday or Saturday night, book by Wednesday.

The 12 small islands that make up **Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge** (*www.fws.gov/cedarkeys*) lie within a 5-mile radius of Cedar Key's shore.

Now an official wilderness area, these islands were once home to Native American Indians and are rewarding places for families who enjoy exploring the outdoors. A number of tour operators are on Dock Street; try **Island Hopper** (*352 543 5904, www.cedarkeyislandhopper.com*) whose 2-hour tours include time to explore an island (US$21, US$15 children under 12). If you'd rather explore alone, kayaks can be rented from **Kayak Cedar Keys** (*352 543 9447, www.kayakcedarkeys.com*) for between US$25 and US$40 for 3 hours, while **Wild Florida Adventures** (*352 528 3984, www.wild-florida.com*) lead half-day kayaking tours along the coastline for US$50 per person.

Apalachicola ★

www.apalachicolabay.org.

Made rich by the cotton that poured through its port from the plantations (not exclusively Florida plantations), Apalachicola's economy and tourist trade relies on the surrounding estuary, one of the most productive sources of seafood in the northern hemisphere. Sampling Apalachicola's excellent oysters is reason enough to stop here, but there's more to this sleepy town than shellfish.

Apalachicola is also famous for its abundance of antebellum houses. Unlike the town's fortunes, these old southern beauties with their wrap-around wooden balconies, rocking chairs and swings, have changed little in over 150 years. Take time off the SR-98 as it steams through town to explore the tree-lined avenues leading to Lafayette Park, a beautiful landscaped refuge with a children's play area and picnic tables – the perfect place to break a journey.

It doesn't take long to explore Apalachicola's working waterfront with its fishing fleet and peaceful river views or the downtown area full of craft shops and art galleries. If you want to discover more about the region's wildlife, spend an hour or so at the **Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve** AGE 5 & UP at the north end of Market Street (*850 653 8063,* open 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, free, time 30 minutes), where you can follow a nature trail and access bird-viewing areas.

Apalachicola is one of the best places in the Panhandle to eat; for an authentic 1950s' American experience, visit the **Old Time Soda Fountain** on Market Street (*850 653 8000)* with its milk bar where you sit on old-fashioned stools and enjoy milkshakes, ice creams and floats from US$3. **Café Con Leche** ★ FIND on 32 Avenue D (*850 653 2233)* is a rustic Internet café with wooden floors, world music and daily newspapers, serving organically grown coffee, healthy breakfast dishes and sandwiches and cakes from US$7. With only one chain motel – the **Best Western Apalach Inn** (*850 653 9131, www.bwapalachinn.com*, rooms US$95–US$110) – there are limited places for families to

stay, so consider finding accommodation on nearby St. George Island instead.

Best Beaches & Beach Communities

Beaches along SR-30A ★★★

www.discover30a.com.

SR-30A, otherwise known as the scenic highway, is an 18-mile stretch of memorable coast road that winds its picturesque way through undeveloped beaches and quaint communities.

The largest and most unique of them all is **Seaside** (*www.seasidefl.com*) where the 1.5-mile stretch of beach and distinctive wooden pavilions is stunning – don't expect to paraglide or jet ski, but do expect to enjoy a child-friendly beach where the sand is like sugar. Take time to explore Seaside's shops and cafés; **Sundog Books** (*850 231 5481, www.sundogbooks.com*) on Central Square stocks a large range of fiction and children's books, and sells walking tours of Seaside for US$5. **Modica Market** (*850 231 1214, www.modicamarket.com*) is a superb deli supermarket selling fresh sandwiches, breads, cakes and upmarket groceries (including PG Tips) along with an impressive selection of beer and wine. Clothes shoppers should head for the speciality shops off Cinderella Circle near the waterfront, where you'll also find **Cafe Spiazzia** ★ (*850 231 1297*) serving fresh pizza, pasta and sandwiches for around US$15 and a children's menu from US$6.

One mile west of Seaside is Grayton Beach State Recreation Area (8am–sunset. US$5 cars, US$2 pedestrians and cyclists), where the quartz white sands are wilder than Seaside's and walking

Apalachicola's working waterfront

trails lead through dunes and pinewoods.

Further west still is the town of Grayton Beach, a favourite with local artists and one of the oldest communities in the area. Keep travelling along SR-30A to reach Gulf Place, a collection of unusual shops and funky cafés, including the recommended **Smiling Fish Café** (junction of SR-30A and SR-393, *850 622 3071*) and **The Red Bar** at 70 Hortz Avenue (*850 231 1008*). Both are open for lunch and dinner and serve main courses starting at US$8.

The powdery sand and mile upon mile of stark white dunes that line SR-399 after it leads away from the town of Navarre Beach and along the edge of Santa Rosa Island, create an almost surreal arctic landscape that's unlike any other strip of beach in Florida. There are few amenities and no lifeguards along this incredible stretch of coastline, which leads west to the motels, restaurants and shops of Pensacola Beach. Built in the early 1800s, Fort Pickens (visitor centre open 9:30am–5pm Mar–Oct, 8:30am–4pm Nov–Feb daily. Fort tours at 2pm) still stands at the far western tip of Santa Rosa Island – pick up a free tour leaflet from the visitor centre to explore this remote spot where the Apache Indian chief Geronimo was once imprisoned.

INSIDER TIP

SR-399 was closed for 5 years due to extensive damage during the 2005 hurricane season. The road is now open but is still vulnerable to closures at times of heavy rain and storm surges. If in doubt, *850 934 2600* or check ***www.nps.gov/guis*** for up-to-date information.

Panama City Beach

*Visitor Information Center, 17001 Panama City Beach Parkway, 850 233 5070, **www.thebeachloversbeach.com**.*

A firm favourite with American college students on spring break (don't bring children here at this time), Panama City Beach is one of the most popular and tackiest party towns in Florida and a rampant display of commercialism by the seaside. As Alt-98 (Front Beach Road) stretches along the vast beach, it becomes one long cruising strip for hot rods and souped-up cars and any view of the sand quickly disappears behind a string of downmarket high-rise resorts. On the other side of the road, cheap gift shops and fast-food joints jostle for attention. However, Front Beach Road and other areas of town are, at the time of writing, undergoing a facelift of landscaping and far-reaching redevelopment, which includes the construction of a swish new airport (see p. 246), all of which aims to attract a more diverse range of visitors than merely partying college students.

That said, with or without redevelopment, Panama City Beach is one of the few places in the Panhandle where families

An All-American Seaside

With a website that encourages you to enjoy the 'life of your time', Seaside is no ordinary town, but definitely a family-friendly one. Developed in the 1980s by award-winning builder/developer Robert Davis, the theory behind this immaculate white picket-fenced community is that a town built of pseudo-Victorian wooden cottages constructed with traditional building methods will nurture a positive community spirit. There is a sense that this town, and the folk who call it home, are almost too good to be true and it comes as no surprise that Seaside was chosen as the location of Jim Carrey's film The Truman Show, in which an insurance clerk discovers that his whole life is entirely fake. However, it's easy to be cynical about a community that's simply trying to make the world a better place and there's a lot more than a great beach and good shopping to enjoy in the uniquely American seaside town. But be warned, if your children are into graffiti, make them leave their spray cans at home.

can have good old fun and enjoy numerous distractions from crazy golf to go-carts.

Popular with teenagers are the 6 acres of wild flume rides, wave pools and water rapids that make up **Ship Wreck Island Water Park** ALL AGES on Middle Beach Road (*805 234 3333, www.shipwreckisland.com*, admission over 50 inches US$33, 35 to 50 inches US$28 – with some ride restrictions for children under 48 inches – under 35 inches free, children under 12 only admitted with an adult). **Ripley's Believe It or Not** AGE 6 & UP (see p. 101) (9907 Front Beach Road, *850 230 6113, www.ripleyspanamacitybeach.com*, open daily from 10am, US$16, US$13 children aged 6–12, under 6s free, time 1 hour) is good for a rainy day and housed in a replica beached ocean liner. All children who love the weird and wonderful enjoy this museum of the eccentric and unbelievable.

Like all the Panhandle beaches, Panama City's is wide, white and beautiful. Public access points are marked with blue and white semicircular signs. However, a more chilled-out option for families who want to spend time on the sand is **St. Andrews State Recreation Area** H (8am–sunset, car US$8, pedestrians and cyclists US$2) to the east of the main beach.

This is one of Florida's most popular state parks and locals and visitors alike flock here to enjoy miles of sand, nature trails and picnic areas. A small artificial reef protects part of the beach, making the water safe for small children, while over the headland, an unprotected beach is perfect for teenagers. Catch a shuttle to Shell Island – an isolated island with a splendid

Bike SR-30A

A cycle path runs the length of SR-30A and offers some of the most scenic cycling in Florida plus 8 miles of off-road biking along a forest trail. Bikes can be rented from various places along the route, or **30A Bike Rentals** (*850 865 7433, https://30abikerentals.net*) offer a free delivery and pick-up service anywhere along SR-30A. Rates range from US$20 a day to US$55 a week for bikes and trailers, tag-a-longs and child seats are all available at an extra cost.

beach where visitors can kayak or hike – which leaves every half hour from 9am to 5pm. Tickets (US$15 adults, US$7 children) are bought from the visitor centre, where you can book snorkelling packages (US$22 adults, US$17 children) or rent kayaks (US$55 per day for a single, US$65 for a double).

St. George Island ★★

www.apalachicolabay.org.

Approximately 15 miles east of Apalachicola, SR-300 branches south from SR-98 and leads to St. George Island, where the glorious beaches are some of the most outstanding in Florida. Families, including many Brits, come here to kick back, mess about on the sand, snorkel, cycle and kayak.

The island's best beaches are in the state park at the far eastern tip (open 8am–sunset, cars US$6, pedestrians and cyclists US$2), where the endless white dunes are home to many nesting birds and are accessible via a 2.5-mile nature trail. You can explore the park, and the whole island, by bike – hire them from **Island Adventures** (*850 927 3655, www.sgislandadventures.com*) on East Gulf Beach Drive for US$15 a day. The range of activities and trips, many just for children, organised by Journeys (see p. 262) is reason enough to come to St. George Island. If you've packed your children off with them for the day, **Eddy Teacher's Raw Bar** (*850 927 5050, www.eddyteachs.com*) next door to Journeys is the perfect place to enjoy a beer and dish of fresh oysters while your youngsters wear themselves out.

State Parks & Historic Sites

Crystal River Preserve State Park

3266 N Sailboat Avenue Crystal River, 352 563 0450, www.floridastateparks.org/crystalriverpreserve.

Stretching along an island-strewn coastline from Homosassa in the south to Yankeetown in the north, Crystal River is characterised by wide horizons, abundant wildlife and a choice of ways to explore the land- and

waterscapes of this evocative region. Biking and hiking trails lace through this free-to-enter park, but the best way to get to know Crystal River is to get out onto its calm water. Kayaks and canoes can be hired for around US$20 per hour from the nearby **Crystal River Kayak Company** (1326 Hwy-19, Crystal River, *352 795 2255, www.kayakcrystalriver.com*), who also organise guided tours. While in the area also drop into the **Crystal River Archaeological State Park** (3400 N Museum Point, *352 795 3817*, open 8am until sunset, US$3 per car, US$2 per pedestrian or bike), which until around 500 years ago was a Native American dwelling and contains a number of burial mounds that can be explored via a short interpretive trail.

Florida Caverns State Park ★★

3345 Caverns Road, Marianna, 850 482 9598, www.floridastateparks.org/floridacaverns.

The main reason to visit this 1,300-acre state park is to explore the amazing series of interconnected caverns crammed with formations ranging from the beautiful to the bizarre. Rediscovered in the 1930s, the caverns have been used by Native American Indians for burials and as a hiding place for Union soldiers during the American Civil War, while the presence of shark teeth, sand dollars and shells embedded in the ceiling serves as a reminder of the geological history. A popular day out for local school children, any child happy to go underground – the caves drop to 55 to 60 feet below ground – will enjoy the 45-minute guided tour (US$8 adults, US$5 children, last tour at 4:30pm, no tours on Tues or Wed) of this unique environment.

Claustrophobics and tall people with bad backs (adults have to bend double in places) should stick with the swimming and nature trails also offered in the park.

***Open** 8am–sunset daily. **Adm** US$5 cars, US$2 pedestrians and cyclists.*
Amenities

Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park ★ AGE 3 & UP

75 miles north of Tampa, Hwy-19, 352 628 5343, www.floridaparks.org/homosassasprings.

This delightful state park has a mission to preserve Florida's native wildlife and its winding wooden boardwalk provides a viewing platform into different natural habitats showcasing a variety of animals including black bears, cougars, alligators, river otters, Key deer and many different species of birds.

The highlight is a small underwater observatory providing intimate viewing of the endangered West Indian manatee, making it one of the best places in Florida to get up close to these lovable creatures.

The park's daily Wildlife Encounter Programmes (check times when buying your ticket) focus on education rather than

Cruising with the Children

If you're looking for entertaining ways to take your children out onto the waters around Panama City Beach, its vast array of water sport activities and themed tours, won't let you down. Head for the marinas at the east end of North Lagoon Drive to book boat tours, snorkelling trips, parasailing and dolphin encounter cruises. Located in Lighthouse Marina, and one of the most popular trips with families, is the Pirate Cruise aboard the **Sea Dragon** ★ AGE 14 & UNDER (*850 234 7400, www.piratecruise.net*, US$21, US$17 children aged 3–14, US$11 children aged 1–2, babies free). Their ticket booth sells toy swords, hooks and bandanas so children can look the part, while adults enjoy the complimentary rum punch.

entertainment, although feeding time for Lu the hippo makes up for this – watch out for the splash zone!

Time *1 hr.* ***Open*** *9am–5:30pm daily (ticket counter closes at 4pm).* ***Adm*** *US$13, US$5 children aged 3–12, under 3s free. RAC and AA members receive a 20% discount.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

INSIDER TIP

Situated on the side of SR-490, 2.5 miles from its junction with Hwy-19, the ruins of Yule Sugar Mill are an excellent place to break a journey. Interpretive boards detail how sugar was made at this steam-driven mill from 1851 until 1864, and picnic tables are available for public use. Pop into the adjacent **Old Mill House Gallery and Printing Museum** (*352 628 1081*, open 10am–3pm Tues–Sat), where the small café houses old printing presses, a Wurlitzer juke box, an old wooden Ford pick-up van, and serves delicious Cuban sandwiches.

Wakulla Springs State Park ★

14 miles south of Tallahassee, SR-267, 850 224 5950, www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings.

Wakulla Springs State Park is home to one of the world's biggest and deepest freshwater springs and is a glorious place for families to mess around by the water. Fringed by a small beach, the swimming is calm, making it safe fun for younger children. The park's abundant wildlife can be discovered via nature trails (bring mosquito repellent between Apr–Oct) and, if the water's clear enough, glass-bottomed boat tours (US$8 adults, US$5 children) provide fascinating views of the 180-foot underwater cavern, through which half a million gallons of water bubble out each day.

Open *8am–sunset daily.* ***Adm*** *US$6 cars, US$2 pedestrians and cyclists.* ***Amenities***

Pirate Cruise aboard the Sea Dragon

Gulfariums

Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories ★ AGE 3 & UP

222 Clark Drive, Panacea, 850 984 5297, www.gulfspecimen.org.

How can a sea squirt be related to a fish? What is a sea cucumber? These are the questions that a visit to this environmental exhibit can answer. There's a focus on the small animals and plants that contribute to the ecological diversity of the north Florida coast and the seawater-filled tanks allow visitors the opportunity to get up close to about 1,200 different marine species, including sea horses, hermit crabs and sea anemones. Families that enjoy rock pooling will love this place.

Time** 1 hr. **Open** 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat, noon–4pm Sun. **Adm** US$8, US$5 children aged 3–11, under 3s free. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

Gulfarium AGE 3 & UP

Hwy-98, Fort Walton Beach, 850 244 5169, www.gulfarium.com.

Open since 1955, the world's oldest marine show aquarium remains one of the best in the state. Highlights include the Living Sea exhibit, a panorama of sealife found in local waters. Children get to feed a variety of birds, and resident species include tropical penguins (not all penguins live in cold places) and injured birds receiving care. Daily dolphin and sea lion shows, and penguin and otter feeding times, are a chance to learn more about the animals, while for an extra US$50 anyone aged over 5 can 'meet and greet' a dolphin.

Time** 2 hr. **Open** 9am–6pm daily, last admission at 4pm. **Adm** US$20, US$12 children aged 3–10, under 3s free. **Credit** MC, V. **Amenities

INSIDER TIP

A good lunch stop near Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories is **Hook Wreck Henry's Dock-side Café** FIND (*850 984 5544*). Named after the owner's son's favourite pirate, this rustic waterfront restaurant serves everything fresh and nothing fried. Sandwiches start at US$7 and there's a children's menu from US$5 plus live music at weekends.

For Active Families

Blackwater River State Park

850 983 5363, www.floridastateparks.org/blackwaterriver.

Blackwater River State Park, with its pure sandy bottom, slow-moving rivers surrounded by ancient oak, pine and juniper forests, is one of the best places in Florida to get out and canoe or kayak. The park's main entrance (8am–sunset, US$4 per car) is situated 3 miles along Deaton Road Bridge after it turns off Hwy-90 at Harold, where you will find nature trails, picnicking and swimming.

However, the best way to go kayaking as a family is through **Adventures Unlimited** ★★ ALL AGES at Coldwater Creek, 12 miles north of Milton off Hwy-87 (*850 623 6197, www.adventuresunlimited.com*). Adventures Unlimited is set in 88 acres of woodland and offers a range of canoeing, kayaking and tubing trips from US$17 per person. They also rent a range of cabin accommodation from US$49–US$249 per night – some with full kitchens, but none with TVs, telephones, clocks or radios. With biking, hiking, challenge rope courses and swimming also on offer, this is an opportunity for wilderness-loving families to enjoy the outdoors in a uniquely American way.

Journeys ★★★ AGE 16 & UNDER

240 East 3rd Street, St. George Island, 850 927 3259, www.sgislandjourneys.com.

With over 15 years experience of leading tours onto the water and deep into the wilderness surrounding St. George Island, Journeys is one of the most experienced companies around to help your family explore this region. Journeys organises a large range of trips, including narrated nature cruises, kayaking with manatees and night-time critter hunting for children, with prices starting at around US$35 per person. Call in advance to see what's on offer. You can also rent canoes and kayaks.

INSIDER TIP

For detailed information on a myriad of ways of enjoying north Florida's rich outdoors, see *www.naturalnorthflorida.com*.

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge

You can't get much further off the beaten track than exploring this 10-mile barrier island to the southwest of Apalachicola, only reached via the **St Vincents Island Shuttle Service** (*850 229 1065, www.stvincentisland.com*,

Seeing Manatees in the Wild

The Crystal and Homasassa rivers are home to a large number of manatees, particularly during the winter months, making this area of the Big Bend excellent for encountering them in the wild. **Sunshine River Tours** (*352 628 3450, www.sunshinerivertours.com*) operate from Homasassa Riverside Resort in Homasassa Springs and organise glass-bottomed boat tours and swimming trips, and the **American Pro Diving Center** (*352 563 0041, www.americanprodiving.com*) on Hwy-19 at Crystal River runs snorkelling and diving trips.

US$10 adults, US$7 children) at Indian Pass on SR-30. Once on the island you can laze on deserted beaches or discover inland freshwater lakes, both of which are abundant in native wildlife including deer and bald eagles.

Explore the island by bike, rented for US$25 from the Shuttle Service – rates include travel to the island. There's a small store at Indian Pass selling drinks, snacks and fishing equipment and, if you fancy a night or two on the edge of a deserted beach, you can rent waterfront cabins from US$95 a night (*850 227 7203, www.indianpasscamp.com*).

FAMILY-FRIENDLY DINING

MODERATE/ EXPENSIVE

Bud & Alley's ★★

SR-30A, Seaside, 850 231 5900, www.budandalleys.com.

Named after a cat and dog, this waterfront restaurant and bar is a firm favourite with locals and visitors alike. The food, with its distinct Mediterranean influence, is all fresh and consistently fabulous. The onsite taco bar serves hearty Mexican fare, while the pizza bar features an imaginative pizza and pasta menu. Healthy options for children are available, including grilled chicken, noodles with marinara sauce and cheese quesadilla. You can eat in contemporary surroundings inside, or on the rooftop bar, where the sunset views are as good as the food and live jazz plays at the weekends. It's advisable to make reservations, even for lunch, as this place is always busy.

Open *Lunch 11:30am–3pm, dinner from 5:30pm daily.* ***Main Courses*** *lunch US$8–US$15, dinner US$30–US$36.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

The Treasure Ship

3605 Thomas Drive, Panama City Beach, 850 234 8881, www.thetreasureship.com.

It's impossible to miss this 200-foot-long wooden pirate

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail

The Suwannee River, many local folk claim, is the 'real' Florida. The river originates at the Okeefenokee Swamp just over the border in Georgia, while this managed trail begins 64 miles downstream at White Springs to the northwest of Lake City, and continues a further 171 miles south until river meets sea at the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge to the north of Cedar Key. For a day experiencing a section of the trail, head to any one of the eight 'hubs' dotted along its length. These are located at towns or parks along the way and also offer opportunities to bike, hike or even horse ride. If you want to have a go at paddling the length of the trail, cabins and camping platforms line the river's banks, but these must be booked in advance. To book a cabin, visit ***www.reserveamerica.com*** and to find out more about the trail *800 868 9914* or see ***www.suwanneeriver.com***.

ship – a full-scale replica of the *Golden Hind*, and one of the funkiest places for children to eat. There are three levels to this restaurant complex offering different styles of dining, all with a pirate theme. Hook's Grille and Grog on level one is open for lunch and dinner, while the more expensive main dining room on level two is open only for dinner from 4pm. At the top of the ship, on level three and with panoramic views, is Captain Crabby's, which contains indoor and outdoor bar-style dining and is famous for its all-you-can-eat specials.

Open *Daily from 11am.* ***Main Courses*** *US$7–US$30.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

MODERATE

Andrew's Capital Grill & Bar ★ FIND

228 S Adams Street, 850 222 3444, ***www.andrewsdowntown.com****.*

This New York-style deli in the shadow of the Capitol Complex has been a firm favourite with the city's white-collar workers for over 30 years and makes for a pleasant change from the Panhandle's beachside bars and seafood restaurants. I eat lunch here as businessmen and women are out in force and this infuses a sophisticated buzz to the conversation and company. However, children are still very welcome, as this is the kind of place people come to take a break from the office and relax, while out-of-town visitors come to soak up the ambience, eavesdrop on the politics and enjoy the delicious food. Many of the items on the menu are named after politics and politicians – my favourite is the blackened 'Jeb' burger (Jeb Bush - George's younger brother and one time Govenor of Florida, which proved very handy in the 2000 election campaign) – and the all-you-can-eat Sunday

buffet (US$13.50) is recommended if you're in town at the weekend. The shady outside terrace is the best place to eat (weather permitting) but expect to wait for a table between noon and 1pm on weekdays.

Open *11:30am–10pm Mon–Thurs, 11:30am–11pm Fri–Sat, 11am–2pm Sun.* ***Main Courses*** *US$9–US$21.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Boat Yard Restaurant

5323 North Lagoon Drive, Panama City Beach, 850 249 9273, ***www.boatyardclub.com****.*

Perched on the marina waterfront of Grand Lagoon, well away from the main drag, The Boat Yard is one of the most pleasant family dining options available in Panama City Beach. The front of this spacious and airy restaurant opens out onto the water – perfect for watching boats come and go. There's a Key West feel to both the ambience and varied menu – the Key Lime Garlic Shrimp is particularly good – and the children's – or Yard Puppies' – meals (all US$7) are served on a Frisbee, which they can keep, and include a soft drink.

Open *11am–11pm daily, later at weekends.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$25.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Boss Oyster ★★

125 Water Street, Apalachicola, 850 653 9364, ***www.apalachicolariverinn.com****.*

All the seafood served in this waterfront restaurant is fresh from the fishing fleet that docks right outside. The seafood chowder is legendary and the seafood pizza topped with oysters, jumbo shrimp, scallops and local crab meat in white garlic sauce is a must. But it's oysters that make this – and most other restaurants in town – famous, and there are so many different ways to eat them (with bacon, cheese, jalapenos, artichoke and even sherry) that even children might give them a go. Add to this the laid-back ambience and never-ending river views and you can see why this is a local favourite.

Open *11:30am–10pm Sun–Thurs, 11:30am–11pm Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$15.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Harry A's

28 West Bayshore Drive, St. George Island, 850 927 3400, ***www.HarryAsRestaurant.com****.*

Yes this is yet another seafood restaurant, but it's hard to escape them in this region of Florida and there's more to the menu of this super-friendly restaurant than the ubiquitous oyster. This place appears a bit rough and ready, but that's in keeping with the island and what it lacks in neatness it makes up for with superb views, a lively atmosphere and child-friendly attitude. It's open for breakfast – when your children can tuck into a breakfast pizza or sausage and pancake on a stick – lunch and dinner with a daily happy hour from 4pm until 7pm and there's often live music in the evenings.

Open *8am–11:30pm Sun–Thurs, 8am–1:30am Fri & Sat.* ***Main Courses*** *US$7–US$27.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Peg Leg Pete's

1010 Fort Pickens Road, Pensacola Beach, 850 932 4139, www.pegl egpetes.com.

Known for being laid-back and friendly, this beachside pirate-themed restaurant has a decent-sized menu, which features sandwiches, seafood, burgers, pasta and, of course, oysters, all reasonably priced and with a Cajun slant. The 'Little Buccaneers' children's menu (US$5–US$6) is standard toasted cheese and fried shrimp fare, but they make it fun by serving the food in a beach bucket and dishing up French fries and a soda fountain with each meal. However, what makes this restaurant stand out for families is that it encourages children to play by providing a large playground in the sand right outside.

Open *Daily for lunch and dinner.* ***Main Courses*** *US$8–US$28.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities***

Seville Quarter ★

130 E Government Street, Pensacola, 850 434 6211, www.sevillequarter.com.

Tucked away in the heart of Pensacola's historical district, this place might play up to the tourists but it's so much fun and so friendly that it just doesn't matter. A rambling antique brick restaurant and bar complex, the Seville Quarter consists of a number of different themed areas – some more family orientated than others – and two beautiful courtyards, one with a striking fountain. This family-run establishment with its big wooden bars, large ceiling fans and Dixieland jazz has a New Orleans' feel and is best enjoyed for lunch or an early evening meal with children – take a wander round and see which area appeals to you the most. Visitors love Lili Marlene's, a themed WW1 aviators' pub and a favourite with locals – Brits will appreciate the genuine old English pub tables. Or if you just fancy a coffee, pick the Palace Café instead.

Open *11am–10pm daily for food.* ***Main Courses*** *US$5–US$9.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities***

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

The Big Bend

Accommodation options in this region are limited to small communities along the coastline. Homosassa Springs, Crystal River and Cedar Key all have a number of options, of which the locally owned businesses are the best family bet. A cluster of chain motels can be found at Perry, 52 miles southeast of Tallahassee, but the only reason to stay here is to put your head down for a night.

EXPENSIVE

Steinhatchee Landing Resort ★

SR-51, Steinhatchee, approximately 90 miles south of Tallahassee, 352 498 3513, www.steinhatcheelanding.com.

Nestled in 35 acres of moss-draped oak, pine and silver palm trees, the charming Steinhatchee Landing is the kind of place that families return to again and again – and it's easy to see why. The resort consists of a collection of one- to four-bedroom old-fashioned individual cottages that sleep between two and 10 and have all the modern conveniences you expect of upmarket, self-catering accommodation. The amount of activities for children available at this resort (canoeing, kayaking, cycling, tennis, archery, basketball, swimming and even shuffleboard) puts it on the family-friendly map – even younger children are catered for, with a petting zoo and playground area. Each cottage has its own screened porch with a charcoal grill – perfect for evening barbecues.

Cottages *56.* ***Rates*** *US$140–US$598 per night.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.*
Amenities ***In room***

MODERATE

The Island Place

550 1st Street, Cedar Key, 352 543 5306, www.islandplace-ck.com.

Just minutes from Cedar Key's marina with its restaurants and shops and right on the waterfront, The Island Place is central enough to be within easy walking distance of the centre of town, yet far enough away to maintain a sense of privacy. All the one- and two-bedroom suites at this friendly resort are comfortable and airy, have fully equipped kitchens and private sea-facing balconies and the ground floor waterfront patio area has a decent sized pool, Jacuzzi and communal charcoal grill.

Rooms *30.* ***Rates*** *One-bedroom suites US$105–US$160 for up to two people, two-bedroom suites US$160–US$190 for up to four people; all units sleep up to five people and each additional person costs US$5, children under 6 free.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

BUDGET

The Port Hotel & Marina

1610 SE Paradise Circle, Crystal River, 352 795 3111, www.porthotelandmarina.com.

Occupying a prime waterfront spot, the Port Hotel in Crystal River is surrounded by acres of radiant wildlife and total peace and quiet. It's this location and the range of activities to keep outdoor-loving families busy, including diving, snorkelling, boating and kayaking, that's the main draw. There's a large swimming pool and family-friendly restaurant onsite and all rooms come with waterfront views. This is as far removed from the high-thrill theme parks and beachside holidays as

Florida gets, and if you and your family are looking for a glimpse of a slower way of life, a taste of the state's timeless wildlife and a myriad of ways to get back to nature, then look no further than this basic budget hotel.

Rooms *100.* ***Rates*** *US$55–US$65.* ***Credit*** *MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** A/C

The Panhandle

Most families visiting the Panhandle want to stay on its beaches. Prices are highest from mid-May to mid-August, during public holidays and spring break (see p. 20). The best times to visit are late spring and early autumn, when the prices are low, beaches quiet and temperatures still high – October/November half-term is a particularly good time for British families to visit this region. Winter rates are still lower, but many tourist-focused restaurants and attractions close and the temperatures cool off.

VERY EXPENSIVE

WaterColor Inn ★★ GREEN

34 Goldenrod Circle, Santa Rosa Beach, near Seaside 32459, *850 534 5000,* ***www.watercolorinn.com****.*

For those families willing to splash out for somewhere special to stay, this stylish, intimate and surprisingly casual luxury resort has it all. The understated rooms – just a few for a resort this size – all face the ocean, have private balconies, bags of space and a walk-in shower with a window overlooking the beach. The biggest attraction for families, however, is Camp Watercolor and its daily range of activities for children aged between 3 and 12, including nature lessons, arts and crafts sessions, a water play area and much more. Leaving parents free to enjoy the resort's many other facilities such as its sunny library, golf and tennis courts, swimming pool (where towels are mango-scented), or simply spend

Staying in Tallahassee

At certain times of the year it can be almost impossible to find a place to stay in Tallahassee. The 60-day sitting of the state legislative begins on the first Tuesday in March, at which time accommodation options are full on weekdays, while weekends in May are busy at graduation time and in autumn, when the Florida State University football team plays at home. During these periods expect to pay very high rates and book well in advance. In terms of chain motels, there are a number clustered on North Monroe Street (Hwy-27) near the junction with I-10 – **Cabot Lodge North** is recommended (*850 386 8880,* ***www.cabotlodgenorthmonroe.com***) and **Apalachee Parkway** (Hwy-27).

Villa Rentals

Many families rent holiday villas along the coastal Panhandle. For holiday homes on St. George Island try **Collins Vacation Rentals** (*850 927 2900, www.collinsvacationrentals.com*) who have around 300 properties to choose from. Further west, **Seaside Cottage Rental Agency** (*850 231 1320, www.seasidefl.com*) and **Rosemary Beach Cottage Rental Company** (*850 278 2100, www.rosemarybeach.com*) both rent hundreds of holiday cottages.

time on the sugar white beaches this region is so famous for.

Rooms *60.* ***Rates*** *US$325–US$530 for two adults and two children sharing, depending on type of room and time of year.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room***

MODERATE

Marriott's Bay Point Resort Village VALUE

4200 Marriott Drive, Panama City Beach, 850 236 6000, www.marriottbaypoint.com.

The range of accommodation options in Panama City Beach is mind-boggling, especially for the first-time family not wanting to get caught in the madness of this party-loving town. Prices tend to be higher than anywhere else along the coastal Panhandle and this resort's reasonable rates make it one of the better options in town. Sitting on the edge of a lagoon at St. Andrew's Bay, the resort is tucked away from the high energy of the main drag. And what it lacks in proximity to the ocean, it makes up for with the large range of activities on offer. For children wanting to have fun outside of the resort, kayak rental, wave-runner tours to the nearby Shell Island and dolphin-spotting tours are just a few of the activities on offer.

Rooms *376.* ***Rates*** *From US$112.* ***Credit*** *AE, MC, V.* ***Amenities*** ***In room*** A/C

Around Tallahassee

EXPENSIVE

The Governors Inn ★★

209 South Adams Street, Tallahassee, 850 681 6855, www.thegovinn.com.

Despite its business feel, this friendly, luxurious hotel, situated in the historic heart of Tallahassee is welcoming for families wanting the buzz of downtown and well worth the extra cost if you don't fancy staying in a chain motel. Each room or suite is named after a former Florida governor and decorated in the style of the period when they held office – some with four-poster beds, oak writing desks and even wood-burning stoves. After a hard day entertaining the

Staying in Pensacola

Pensacola has a string of decent motels on Pensacola Boulevard (SR-29) south of the junction with I-10 – try the **Quality Inn** 6550 (*850 477 0711, www.qualityinn.com/hotel/fl732*). A good downtown option is the **Days Inn** on Palafox Street (*850 438 4922, www.daysinn.com*) and for Pensacola Beach try the **Hilton Garden Inn** (*850 916 2999, www.pensacolabeach.gardeninn.com*).

children in the city's museums, parents can enjoy free evening cocktails in the pine-panelled Florida Room. This hotel is very popular so book in advance.

Rooms** 41. **Rates** Doubles US$159–US$239, suites US$189–US$309 based on two people sharing, extra person US$10 per night. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **In room

Wakulla Springs Lodge GREEN

550 Wakulla Park Drive, Wakulla Springs, 850 224 5950, www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings.

Built in 1937 and one of the few places to stay between Tallahassee and Apalachicola, this elegant hotel won't appeal to families whose children need a lot of stimulation (there are no TVs in the rooms). However, for those fed up with bland motel accommodation, this simple, old-fashioned, elegant hotel with its antique furniture and marble bathrooms is a charming alternative. The real draw, though, for families, is the hotel's location. Situated deep inside a popular and pretty state park, guests can roam the grounds and swim in the springs long after day trippers have gone home.

You can lounge in deep sofas and play checkers in the hotel's lobby, and the old Ball Room is now a reasonably priced restaurant. The best bit for children is the old-fashioned soda fountain which serves ice creams and snacks throughout the day.

***Rooms** 27. **Rates** US$95–US$150. **Credit** AE, MC, V. **Amenities** **In room** A/C*

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TELEPHONE TIPS

To dial Florida from another country: *From the UK and New Zealand 00 (+1) (international code to USA), 305 (Miami) 407 (Orlando), Canada +1 or Australia 0011 +1*

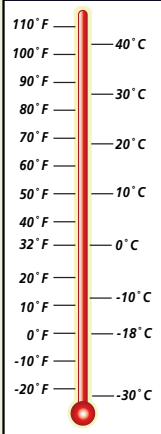
To make an international call from Florida: *Dial 011, followed by the country code: UK +44, Ireland +353, Canada +1, Australia +61, New Zealand +64*

CLOTHING SIZES

WOMEN			MEN			CHILDREN	
UK	US	Europe	UK Metric (cm)	US	Europe	UK Metric (Ht cm)	US
8	6	36	91	36	46	109	4
10	8	38	97	38	48	122	6
12	10	40	102	40	50	140	8
14	12	42	107	42	52	147	10
16	14	44	112	44	54	152	12
18	16	46				157	14
20	18	48					

METRIC CONVERSIONS

TEMPERATURE



To convert F to C:
subtract 32 and multiply by 5/9 (.555)
To convert C to F:
multiply by 1.8 and add 32

32˚F = 0˚C

DISTANCE

To convert	multiply by
inches to centimetres	2.54
centimetres to inches	.39
feet to metres	.30
metres to feet	3.28
yards to metres	.91
metres to yards	1.09
miles to kilometres	1.61
kilometres to miles	.62

1 ft = .30 m ***1 mile = 1.6 km***
1 m = 3.3 ft ***1 km = .62 mile***

WEIGHT

To convert	multiply by
Ounces to grams	28.35
Grams to ounces	.035
Pounds to kilograms	.45
Kilograms to pounds	2.20

1 ounce = 28 grams
1 pound = .4555 kilogram

1 gram = .04 ounce
1 kilogram = 2.2 pounds

LIQUID VOLUME

To convert	multiply by
Gallons to litres	4.55
Litres to gallons	.22
Pints to litres	.56
Litres to pints	1.76

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